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ABSTRACT

A study examined alternatives to retention or social promotion. Chapter 1 considers the short-term and long-term consequences of each alternative and concludes that neither improves declining graduation rates, declining ability to meet employer requirements, or the achievement gap between white students and students of color. Chapter 2 recommends standards-driven reform that includes effective and nonpunitive assessment. Chapter 3 suggests that prevention and early intervention, through quality preschool education, are preferable to remediation. Chapter 4 emphasizes flexibility in structuring curriculum, instructional practices, and classroom time so that every student continually engages in learning and receives appropriate interventions. Chapter 5 recommends an alignment of student and teaching standards, with a strategy at state and district levels to attract, train, and keep effective schoolteachers. Chapter 6 states that schools should never give up on students at any point in their education, though special attention should be given to the first year of middle school and high school. Each chapter has a summary of suggested state policies and actions. Sidebars give real-world examples of effective schools or programs. An appendix summarizes successes in standards-based reform in North Carolina, Texas, and Connecticut. (Contains 131 references.) (RKJ)

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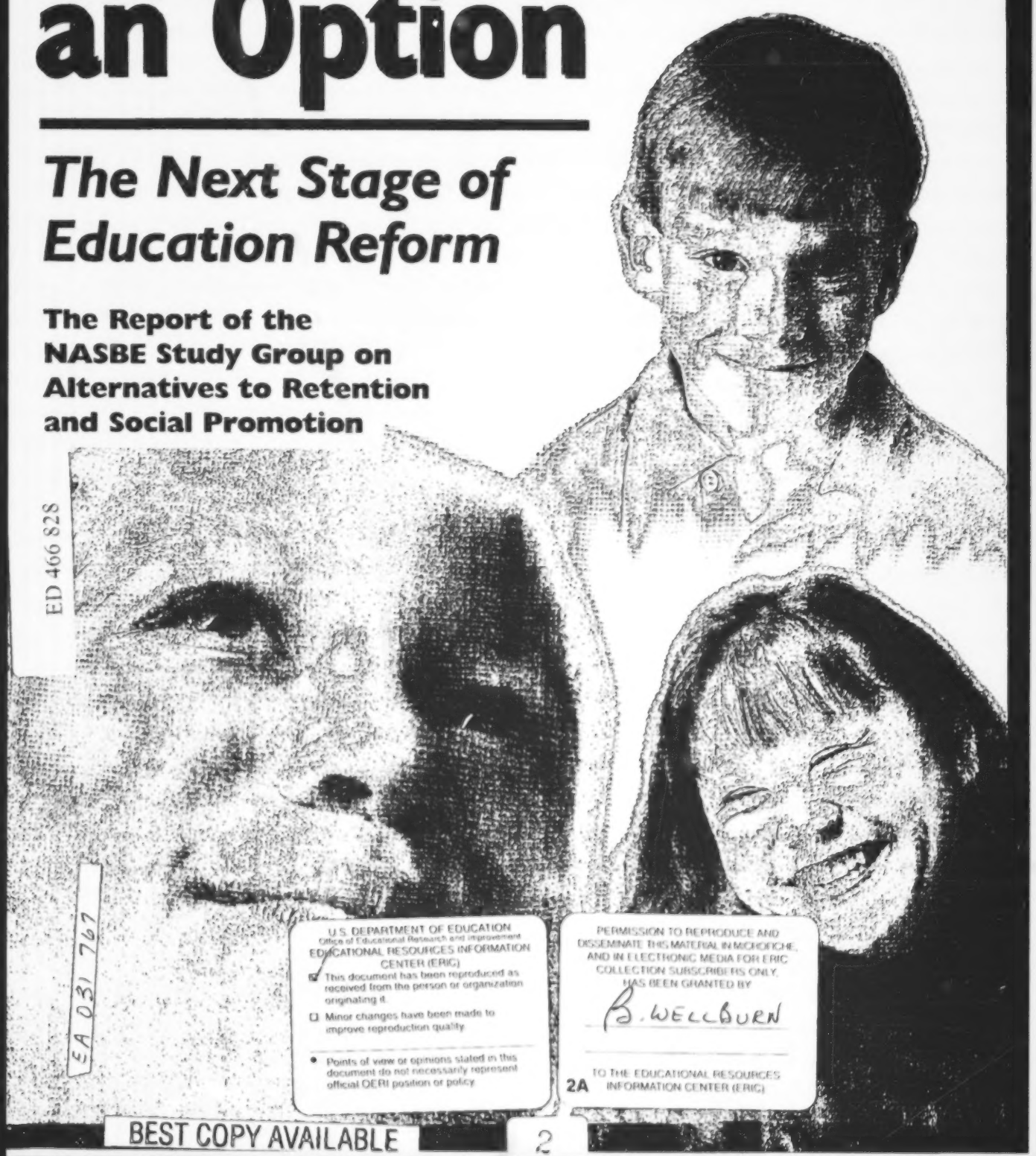
Failure Is Not an Option

The Next Stage of Education Reform

The Report of the NASBE Study Group on Alternatives to Retention and Social Promotion



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Failure Is Not an Option:

The Next Stage of Education Reform

The Report of the NASBE Study Group on Alternatives to Retention and Social Promotion

October 2000

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For more details about alternative strategies to retention and social promotion, read the Fall 2000 edition of NASBE's policy journal, the *State Education Standard*.

Preface

Each year the National Association of State Boards of Education sponsors study groups comprosed of members who wish to examine selected education issues in detail. The study groups meet several times to listen to presentations by noted policy authorities, analyze current research, discuss issues at length, and seek consensus on a set of recommendations for other education policymakers.

The NASBE Board of Directors selected as one of the study group topics for the year 2000 "Helping Students Move through School: Alternatives to Retention and Social Promotion." Its charge to the Study Group noted that research evidence has shown that students who are promoted without achieving necessary knowledge and skills fare little better than their peers who are retained—the achievement of both groups is woefully inadequate. Emphasizing the fact that *neither* social promotion nor retention alone can foster student success, the NASBE Board asked the Study Group to explore ways can schools be restructured to eliminate the promotion/retention dichotomy and to recommend prevention mechanisms to put in place that would render obsolete fruitless discussions of social promotion versus retention.

The NASBE Study Group on Alternatives to Retention and Social Promotion has built on the work of previous study groups, most notably:

The Future Is Now: Addressing Social Issues in Schools of the 21st Century, the report of the NASBE Study Group on Confronting Social Issues: The Role of Schools (1999);

The Numbers Game: Ensuring Quantity and Quality in the Teaching Force, the report of the NASBE Study Group on Teacher Development, Supply, and Demand (1998);

Public Accountability for Student Success: Standards for Education Accountability Systems, the report of the NASBE Study Group on Education Accountability (1998);

The Full Measure, the report of the NASBE Study Group on Statewide Assessment Systems (1997);

Financing Student Success: Beyond Equity and Adequacy, the report of the NASBE Study Group on Funding Education in the 21st Century (1997); and

Caring Communities, the report of the National Task Force on School Readiness (1991).

Over a course of three meetings the Study Group also heard presentations from the following recognized experts:

January 21-22, 2000

Kathryn Doherty, Planning and Evaluation Service, U.S. Department of Education

Melissa Roderick and John Easton, Consortium on Chicago School Research

Joan Baratz-Snowden, American Federation of Teachers

March 10-11, 2000

James Causby, Superintendent, Johnston County (North Carolina) Schools

Velma LaPoint, Center for Research on the Education of Students Placed At Risk (CRESPAR)

Tom Schultz, Head Start Program
Joan Lombardi, Independent Consultant for Head Start

June 16-17, 2000

James McPartland, Johns Hopkins University

Shelia Evans-Tranumn, Associate Commissioner for New York City Schools and Community Services

Executive Summary

Failure Is Not an Option

States, districts, and schools across the nation feel trapped in a dilemma. It is increasingly clear that the often-used practice of "social promotion" (automatically promoting a student to the next grade along with his/her peers despite poor academic performance) does a student no favor in the long run. The practice is a damning indication of a school's failure to educate.

A common policy response that can be quickly implemented is to institute rigorous testing of students' progress towards achieving academic standards and to retain low-performing students in the same grade. Yet research has shown that simply requiring a student to repeat the same instructional program rarely helps a student to improve his/her performance. Retention can also directly contribute to higher school drop-out rates.

The policy debate is often framed as the need to make an either-or choice between social promotion or retention. However, the NASBE Study Group on Alternatives to Retention and Social Promotion considers this to be a false choice. Policies and programs need to be adopted that both prevent social promotion and also relegate retention to an option of last resort. Education decision makers must transcend the traditional debate and move on to the next stage of education reform. It is time to turn the slogan "all children can learn" into reality.

To accomplish this, education policymakers need to step back and reconsider the entire system. There is no single or quick fix that will help each struggling student. Education policymakers must squarely address complex—and sometimes expensive—issues of capacity, resources, organization, and uses of time. Erasing the persistent achievement gap between different racial and ethnic groups must be a leadership priority. Schools have to be able to do whatever it takes to meet each student's educational needs, and be held accountable for the results. Meanwhile, policymakers should never give up on students currently in the system who are failing academically.

Accordingly, the study group makes the following recommendations to all state and local education policymakers:

- **Stay the course on systemic standards-driven reform that includes implementing credible assessment systems and effective, non-punitive accountability measures;**
- **Establish universally available opportunities for quality preschool education;**
- **Allow local districts and schools flexibility to structure curriculum, instructional practices, and classroom time so that every student is continually engaged in learning and receives**

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helping interventions as needed to achieve academic standards;

- **Ensure that all teachers are well prepared and supported; and**
- **Never give up on students, no matter where they are in their education.**

The study group discovered that those states and cities that have made significant progress at implementing real education reforms share a common factor that is easily overlooked and often underestimated: major stakeholders groups and political leaders have reached consensus on the need for reform, the imperative that teaching and learning needs to be at the heart of reform, and the general outlines of the reform measures to implement. State and local boards of education should demonstrate leadership by assembling coalitions, building political bridges, dampening ideological strife, providing sustained, goal-oriented direction, and assuring policy alignment. Boards can help other decision makers and the general public transcend false dichotomies that undermine efforts to help all children achieve higher standards.

It is time to move on to the next stage of education reform. *Failure is not an option.*

Copies of *Failure Is Not an Option* are available from the National Association of State Boards of Education, 277 South Washington Street, Suite 100, Alexandria, VA 22314. Phone: 703/684-4000.

Chapter 1

Moving to the Next Stage of Education Reform

The 1995 film *Apollo 13* depicted how the astronauts and ground crew of the crippled 1970 moon shot struggled to solve one intractable survival problem after another. At one point flight director Gene Kranz, reminding his ground crew they had no choice but to overcome the immense challenges of the situation, thundered, "Failure is not an option!" Applying the resourceful innovations developed by the engineers in Houston, the crew was eventually returned safely to Earth.

Education policymakers might feel that they are facing a similarly daunting challenge, albeit less technical and immediately life-threatening: how to realize the ambitious goal of providing high-quality education to every child in America. In the rapidly emerging global economy of the early 21st century, a nation's strength and prosperity is to a great extent determined by how well all of its citizens are educated. Simple justice also demands that no child be allowed to fail academically and thereby be hobbled for life. In this endeavor, too, success is the only acceptable option.

Social Promotion and Its Consequences

For many—perhaps most—students, the public education system is providing a solid foundation for a productive and satisfying adult life. Yet too many young Americans are still being left behind academically despite an abundance of research and experience that tells us "what works." School principals are often faced with the uncomfortable choice of holding back students who are not achieving to academic standards or allowing the students to progress to the next grade with their peers, hoping that the students' deficiencies can be made up somehow. Parental pressure not to hold their children back, combined with concern for students' social and psychological welfare, often leads to decisions to "socially promote" low-performing students.

But many socially promoted students are not able to subsequently catch up, and they continue to fall further and further behind academically. Socially promoted students might put in the required amount of seat time and graduate from high school, but without acquiring the skills needed for a productive and satisfying life. Although the prevalence of social promotion is difficult to measure because few educators openly admit to the practice, evidence of the problem abounds:

- The 1998 National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) determined that 70 percent of the nation's 4th and 8th graders are reading at "basic" or "below basic" achievement levels.[1]
- In 1997, a third of high school graduates had to take remedial courses in reading, writing, or math upon entering college; 81 percent of American public colleges now offer such courses.[2]

- Research indicates that 10 to 15 percent of young adults who graduate from high school but have no further formal education cannot balance a checkbook or write a letter to a credit card company about a bill.[3]

- In a 1999 survey, 64 percent of employers said most high school graduates do not have the skills necessary to succeed in the workplace. Three in 10 reported they have had to simplify jobs because of the lower quality of recent applicants.[4]

The cumulative effects of social promotion have far-reaching consequences for society. In a 1998 survey of 430 CEOs of the nation's fastest-growing companies, 69 percent reported the shortage of skilled, trained workers as a barrier to growth.[5] Studies find that 43 percent of people with the lowest literacy skills live in poverty, and 70 percent have no job or only a part-time job. Nationwide, 70 percent of prisoners scored in the two lowest literacy levels of the National Adult Literacy Survey. This means that while they have some reading and writing skills, they are not adequately equipped to perform tasks like understanding a bus schedule. Prisoners with low literacy skills return to prison more often.[6]

The effects of social promotion on people's attitudes are less directly measured, but nevertheless have real consequences. For instance, the practice depreciates the value of a high school diploma. Social promotion sends all students a message that little is expected of them, and students learn they can get by without working hard.[7] Social promotion can give low-performing students and their families a false sense of accomplishment, which can have detrimental consequences in later life.

The uncomfortable truth is that the practice of social promotion represents a failure of the public education system. In particular, it tends to mask the poor academic performance of many disadvantaged students. For instance, African American and Latino high school seniors, on average, score at the same level as non-Hispanic white 8th graders on NAEP math and reading tests.[9]

Although some leaders of communities of color prefer not to draw attention to the embarrassing "achievement gap," others consider the practice of social promotion a scandalous attempt to hide disparities in educational opportunity and the poor quality of many schools attended by disadvantaged students. They regard social promotion as a symptom of unconscionably low expectations for minority and low-income students held by many educators and policymakers.[10]

More about Social Promotion

A study of 85 school districts by the American Federation of Teachers (AFT) found the following information about social promotion:[8]

- Many districts implicitly support social promotion, and their policies declare retention the "option of last resort";

- In most districts, there are no agreed-upon, explicit standards of performance against which student progress can be judged and on which a credible, defensible promotion decision can be made;

- Teachers, who have the most knowledge of students, often can make recommendations regarding retention but rarely have the final authority on such decisions, and frequently they are pressured by principals and parents to pass students along;

- Many districts require that, under certain conditions, students be moved ahead regardless of performance; and

- There is little provision for programs to prevent or intervene with students who fall behind.

"For us to grant diplomas to students who don't have the knowledge and skills to survive is well-meaning but misdirected paternalism."

James A. Peyser, Chairman
Massachusetts State Board of Education[11]

"Social promotion is an insidious practice that hides school failure and creates problems for everybody—for kids, who are deluded into thinking they have learned the skills to be successful or get the message that achievement doesn't count; for teachers who must face students who know that teachers wield no credible authority to demand hard work; for the business community and colleges that must spend millions of dollars on remediation; and for society that must deal with a growing proportion of uneducated citizens, unprepared to contribute productively to the economic and civic life of the nation."

American Federation of Teachers[12]

Retention and Its Consequences

The current high-profile political drive to "ban social promotion" began in 1996 with the multi-faceted initiative in Chicago to raise unacceptable levels of student performance. Politicians from both parties nationwide have since advocated legislation that explicitly aims to end social promotion by constructing "promotion gates" and "graduation hurdles" that rely on test scores. The effect of this reform strategy on student improvement is designed to be two-fold: the threat of retention in grade is meant to motivate students to perform well on academic achievement assessments, while for those who do not demonstrate academic proficiency, another year in the same grade provides another chance to master the material.

Yet the evidence is clear that retention has been of little lasting educational benefit for students who were retained. A major study conducted by the Center for Research on the Education of Students Placed At Risk (CRESPAR) using nationally representative data from 1991-1994 is instructive. The study found that repeating grade one did indeed help to close, but not erase, the achievement differences between retained students and those who progressed normally through school.[13] But the researchers also found that the gap started to widen again once the retained child reached later grades. Comparing students of the same age, rather than the same grade, told a less encouraging story. The study determined that the achievement differences between retained and promoted students did not improve. Repeating a grade did nothing to help retained students catch up to their peers.

These findings are echoed by recent findings from the Consortium on Chicago School Research, an independently funded group of highly regarded researchers who are observing the city's anti-social promotion policies from numerous angles. The Consortium determined that students retained under the strict new policies have continued to fare poorly, doing no better than similarly unsuccessful students who had been automatically promoted in previous years. In her remarks to the Study Group, Dr. Melissa Roderick stated that "retention does no good" for the students who are merely sent through the same grade again without changes in

"Is retention beneficial to students? In same-grade comparisons, retention does appear to consistently shrink the before-retention achievement gap between retained and promoted children. In this sense, retention may be said to be beneficial. At the same time, retention does not close the gap, nor does it leave retained children performing at an acceptably high level. Even after the gains from retention, the retained children are still not performing adequately."

Nancy Karweit, CRESPAR

The Stubborn Achievement Gap: At the Heart of the Issue

Chief among the challenges for education policymakers is the significant "achievement gap" between white students and students of color. According to a Public Agenda poll, more than half of black parents call underachievement among black students a "crisis" (though only a third of white respondents see it this way).

The racial/ethnic achievement gap narrowed considerably from 1970 to 1988 on NAEP math and reading tests, but since then average scores of African American and Hispanic students have only fluctuated within a narrow range.[14] Researchers are finding that disparities in academic achievement among different racial and ethnic groups appear early: by kindergarten, minority pupils already lag behind their white classmates in early reading and math skills.

No single explanation for the stubbornly persisting achievement gap has emerged, meaning no single solution will solve the problem. Among the explanations offered are:[15]

- Inadequate educational opportunities resulting from disparities in funding, teacher qualifications, instructional methods and course offerings, preschool availability, facilities, and other resources;
- The "tyranny of low expectations," an attitude on the part of teachers, the media, family and community members, and students themselves that future success is unlikely, which some consider a pernicious form of racism;
- The consequences of living in poverty, which often means inadequate health care, nutrition, and housing; fewer educational resources in the home and opportunities for enrichment; moving often; and lack of hope for a better future;
- Parenting styles that don't help prepare children for school or support their success; and
- Influences from peers and popular culture that distract from or discourage achievement.

instruction and methodology—the student only fails the same way again.

Retention in the early grades is often justified as providing more time for students to mature physically, emotionally, and socially. The CRESPAR study mentioned above did find some evidence that repeating first grade improved students' attention span and motivation to learn compared to their non-retained peers, as reported by teacher ratings. But less improvement was noted in the retained students' ratings on cooperation, enjoyment of school, and class participation.

At a national average cost per pupil of over $6,500 for a year of public schooling, with few positive results to show for making a student repeat a grade, it is not difficult to conclude that retention is indeed a wasteful and costly practice.[16]

Yet critics of retention argue that grade retention is worse than a waste of time and money: it is actively harmful to children's healthy social and emotional development, being particularly damaging to their self-image and academic self-concept. Most children perceive retention as a personal failure or

punishment. In a 1989 study, 87 percent of children interviewed said that being retained made them feel "sad," "bad," "upset," or "embarrassed."[17] Many educators are convinced that failing a grade is a stressful and stigmatizing event with long-term consequences for most retained students. A lack of academic self-confidence can turn feelings of failure into a self-fulfilling prophecy.

Chief among the documented negative consequences of retention is a higher likelihood of dropping out of school. Findings from a considerable body of research point to retention in grade as a major contributor to school drop-out rates. For example, when comparing students with equally poor achievement levels, those who are retained instead of being socially promoted are 20 to 30 percent more likely to drop out of school. Dropouts are five times more likely to have repeated a grade than high school graduates. Repeating a grade twice makes the probability of dropping out nearly 100 percent.[18]

A troubling fact is that retention is disproportionately applied to certain types of students. The literature on grade retention presents a fairly consistent portrait of the students who are most at risk of being retained in grade: males, minority students, students from lower socio-economic homes, students with disabilities, and students with poor health conditions.[19] According to 1996 population statistics from the U.S. Department of Education's Planning and Evaluation Service, retention is more than twice as likely among boys as among girls and more than twice as prevalent among African American students as among white students.[20] Other factors found to be associated with being retained are large family size, mother with low educational attainment, single parent

How Widely Practiced Is Retention?

Surprisingly little national data have been collected that could provide a good snapshot of the prevalence of retention in grade. Some states do not collect such information at all, many others collect only limited data, and it is difficult to interpret and compare the data that are collected.[21] Some of the indications include the following:[22]

- According to the National Household Education Survey, about 7 percent of first graders in 1995 were either repeating first grade or had repeated kindergarten.
- According to a nationally representative study of students K-3, a total of 18.4 percent of third-grade students in 1994 had ever been retained in kindergarten, first grade, or second grade. About 1.8 percent of students had been retained twice.
- That study documented that first grade is the most frequent grade of retention. Parents of children retained before first grade most often cite immaturity as the major reason for retention, while parents of older children cite academic difficulties as the major reason.
- The study found that African American students constitute 20 percent of the population surveyed but 32 percent of the students retained. Some 31 percent of retained students had a disability, compared to 15 percent of non-retained students.
- Population statistics indicate that across all age groups, 2.6 percent of white students, 3.8 percent of Hispanic students, and 5.9 percent of African American students are two or more years over the expected age for their grade.

home, lower household income, parent with "lower occupational prestige," high rate of family mobility, participation in the Title I or Head Start programs, attendance in a high-poverty school, and living in the South.[23]

This is not to say that retention is never an appropriate strategy to help individual students.

In a recent book, Jim Grant, executive director of the Society for Developmental Education, summarizes various categories of students who do not benefit from retention and those who might (see box). The Study Group believes that retention in grade should only be used as an option of last resort when better options detailed in this report are not applicable.

Learners Who May Not Benefit from Retention include the Following...

Students who are already one year older than their oldest classmates—*No* students who have already been retained or received an additional year of learning time (even at home) should spend another year in the same grade. When a child is a year older and still experiencing severe school problems, there are undoubtedly other causes that need to be addressed directly. The social and emotional problems that result from being two years older are very likely to undermine the child's academic performance and have a negative impact on classmates.

Low-ability students—Students who are doing poorly in school *solely* because of low ability are likely to continue to do poorly even if they spend another year in the same grade. Retention is not an IQ booster.

Gifted students who are bored—Students who are truly bored and doing poorly in school may be gifted or talented children whose exceptional abilities have not been recognized or are disguised by other problems.

Transient and high-absentee students—Studies suggest that students who frequently miss school or move to new schools are more likely to drop out of school. Retention may make students of this sort even less likely to attend school. Transience and high absenteeism are often the result of *parental* problems that retention cannot solve.

"Streetwise" students—Some elementary school students act like they are 8 going on 17. Retention won't give these students their childhood innocence back, and it may make them even more determined to show they don't care about school work. Meanwhile, their younger classmates will have to deal with a child who is even older and more streetwise than before, and who is unlikely to support other students' pursuit of academic excellence.

Students who have low self-esteem—When children have a long-term history of self-esteem problems—or if a child suddenly loses self-esteem because of something unrelated to school—retention can exacerbate the downward momentum.

Emotionally disturbed students—When students are emotionally disturbed or suffer from a behavior disorder, being retained can exacerbate the situation enough to prevent improvements in academic performance.

Students suffering from multiple, complex problems—When a student is suffering from a range of problems that extend far beyond the issues additional learning time can address, retention may just create additional problems. Other sorts of interventions that address the child's most pressing problems should be the top priority.

Lazy/unmotivated students—In my long career as an educator, I've only met two students who were truly lazy or unmotivated. All the others who seemed lazy or unmotivated actually turned out to be depressed or "shut down" for other reasons—usually family matters.

Students who have unsupportive parents—When parents actively resist retention—when parents are so uninvolved they are unlikely to provide needed academic and emotional support—retention can rarely solve a child's academic problems, even if the problems are caused by wrong grade placement.

The Threat of Retention as a Reform Policy

Despite the problems associated with retaining students in grade, the use of retention has increased significantly over the last five years. Responding to complaints that too many public high school graduates cannot read or are otherwise unprepared for higher education or productive careers, numerous business and political leaders have settled on a strategy to use the threat of retention in grade as the primary strategy to "ban social promotion." Seven states now have laws to link student promotion to test results, and 26 states require (or will soon require) students to pass state tests to graduate from high school. According to the Council of the Great City Schools, policies against social promotion are officially on the books in 35 of 48 big-city school systems.

There is much public support for this "tough love" position: according to a 1999 Phi Delta Kappan/Gallup poll, most Americans (72 percent) "favor stricter standards for social promotion in school even if it meant that significantly more students would be held back." Even greater proportions of parents (79 percent) and teachers (76 percent) agreed when asked to choose from only these two options.[24]

There is evidence that the threat of retention does in fact motivate many students. In a 1999 survey, Public Agenda found that nearly three-quarters of high school students reported that "fear of being left back" in school and "avoiding summer school" motivated them "a lot" to work hard in school.[25] Exit exams, too, appeared to be effective motivators for many students. Of high school students surveyed in schools where seniors are required to pass an exit exam to graduate, 68 percent said the exit exam made them work harder.

Yet evidence is also building that a policy of relying on the threat of retention in grade as a primary means to end social promotion has only limited effectiveness as a strategy to generally improve public schools. The Chicago experience provides some particularly valuable lessons.

The Consortium on Chicago School Research estimates that some 37 percent of Chicago students were being "socially promoted" before a strict new policy was adopted in 1996 to base promotion from grades 3, 6, and 8 on students' performance on the Iowa Tests of Basic Skills. The research team found that in the first two full years the policy was in place about a third of the students who might have been socially promoted in the past were

...and Students Most Likely to Benefit from Retention Tend to Be:

Chronologically young or physically small children—When a relative lack of growing and learning time is the primary cause of a student's problems, an additional year in the same grade can be a great help.

Late bloomers—Whatever their chronological age relative to their classmates, some children may be developing at a slower but still normal rate. An extra year in the same grade can help them reach their true potential, as well as avoid negative attitudes about school and themselves.

Children whose problems have been dealt with—Sometimes, other factors prevent average or high-ability children from learning needed information and skills. An extra year in the same grade can then help them catch up if the factors that initially caused the school problems have also been dealt with effectively.

Children who have supportive parents—When a child's parents agree that retention is in the best interests of the child—and the parents are then willing to provide emotional support and help with school work—the child is far more likely to adjust well and achieve academic success.

Jim Grant, *Retention and Its Prevention: Making Informed Decisions about Individual Children* (Rosemont, NJ: Modern Learning Press, 1997).

Social promotion is not an educationally sound policy and is harmful to many students and the nation.	**TRUE or FALSE**
Retention in grade is not an educationally sound policy and is harmful to many students and society.	**TRUE or FALSE**
To bring an end to social promotion, policymakers must require low-performing students to be retained in grade until they meet academic standards.	**TRUE or FALSE**

apparently motivated by the threat of retention to improve their academic performance. Approximately another third were helped by mandatory summer school programs and other interventions to raise their performance to acceptable levels.[26] Encouragingly, the performance of students with the lowest skills showed the greatest improvement.[27]

But to the dismay of those who hoped that an unyielding "no social promotion" policy would sufficiently pressure every student to succeed, the final third of students who might have been socially promoted in the past continued to fail the test after multiple attempts and were thus retained in grade as per the new policy. Subsequently, fewer than half of the retained students could pass the test even after two years in the same grade and twice attending the summer school program, and so nearly 1,600 were retained for the second time in the 1998-99 school year.

What will happen to these students? On past experience, virtually none of them could be expected to graduate from high school. Indeed, the Consortium has found that 40 percent of eighth graders who were retained in 1997 had already dropped out or otherwise left the school system by the fall of 1999.[28]

The researchers further found that most students who benefitted from the summer school program enough to pass the test and be promoted to the next grade did not thrive thereafter, once they were back in the regular classroom. Based on these findings, Dr. Roderick stressed to the Study Group an important conclusion that carries major implications for policymakers: ***the positive effects of the Chicago reform policies are not enough to compensate for weaknesses in the regular classroom.*** The brief intervention that successfully helped students pass the test hurdle had only short-term effects because the students were returning to classrooms that were not educating them adequately in the first place.*

This finding is consistent with many other researchers' findings that retention usually fails to help students when it simply means repeating practices that failed them previously. For example, the CRESPAR study cited earlier, which found that repeating first grade does not eliminate the achievement gap, also examined classroom practices and found very little difference in classroom organization or the instructional content and approaches used with students who were repeating the first grade.[29] That is, the student were simply repeating the same experience with little positive benefit to show for it.

The American public expresses a common sense perspective about the relative importance of ending social promotion as a school reform strategy. The year 2000 Phi Delta Kappan/Gallup poll asked respondents to rank four possible reform measures for improving public schools. A majority of 52 percent chose ensuring "a qualified, competent teacher in every classroom" as the most promising solution, as

** In a September 2000 update, the Consortium found encouraging evidence that regular classroom practices are beginning to change for the better. The steady increases in the proportion of students passing the tests are now occurring during the school year, not during the special summer program.*

compared to 19 percent who supported the option of offering a "free choice for parents among a number of private, church-related, and public schools"; 17 percent who chose "rigorous academic standards" as the best reform strategy; and just 10 percent who put most faith in "the elimination of social promotion."[30]

The False Choice

Education Week has likened the debate over social promotion versus retention to a pendulum that continually swings from one extreme to the other from decade to decade.[31] The reality is that neither social promotion nor retention improves failing students' chances for educational success. Low-achieving students continue to be low achievers after being promoted, while most retained students never catch up with their peers.

The NASBE Study Group on Alternatives to Retention and Social Promotion firmly believes that ***the issue as commonly framed—as a stark choice between social promotion or retention—presents decision makers and the public with a false choice between two poor alternatives that both result in unacceptable consequences.*** The results of both policies are high dropout rates, especially for poor and minority students, and inadequate knowledge and skills for students. Neither practice closes the learning gap for low-achieving students, and neither practice is an appropriate response to the academic needs of students experiencing difficulty mastering required coursework.[32]

Education policymakers must transcend the false choice between social promotion and retention. The strategies that will truly make real and lasting improvements in the public schools involve instituting policies and programs to ensure that no child is ever left behind academically. Our attention must be on improving daily classroom instruction, not just implementing high-stakes tests. Instead of simply being recycled through "more of the same," failing students need educational strategies that are different from the ones that failed them in the first place—and schools that routinely fail students must change their educational strategies so that "failure is not an option."

Study Group Beliefs

The policy recommendations for moving into the next stage of education reform were developed by the Study Group in accordance with a set of principles reached by consensus, as follows:

1. All students can and must learn to challenging standards; every child matters.
2. The nation must have a commitment to a strong system of effective and responsive public schools.
3. The state has a responsibility to help schools and districts provide opportunities for students to achieve.
4. Long-term commitment to reform measures is essential. There are no silver bullets, no easy answers.
5. Policies and programs must be data-driven and research-based.
6. Prevention and early intervention are better than remediation.
7. Policies and programs must help all students, not just the low-performers.
8. Widespread buy-in and public support are necessary.

The study group emphasizes that systemic reform means to thoroughly changing how the system operates statewide. Reform needs to go beyond the K-12 public school system to encompass pre-school through higher education, and across all agencies that serve young people through adulthood, including early childhood services, the juvenile justice system, health and human services, and recreational services.

Chapter 2
Staying the Course

Recommendation:

Stay the course on systemic standards-driven reform that includes implementing credible assessment systems and effective, non-punitive accountability measures.

The Progress of Education Reform

The Study Group affirmed that because holding high expectations for all students is key to addressing the social promotion–retention dichotomy, then states must continue their efforts with systemic, standards-driven reform. High standards embed these expectations in policy and make them the backbone of the system. To date, the general progression of reform has been that states and districts initially established academic standards to codify what every child should know and be able to do. The states then developed assessments tied to the standards in order to measure students' progress toward meeting these goals. One result of these initiatives is that it has been possible for the first time to gauge the true extent to which social promotion has been accepted practice. The shortcomings of public schools were not quite so visible before standards and assessments were implemented. As the *Christian Science Monitor* put it, "The numbers may look boring, and they're certainly controversial, but you can't do much to improve schools until you know what needs fixing."[33]

The members of the Study Group wholeheartedly agree with the major premise of standards-driven reform—that clearly defined expectations of what students should know and be able to do must serve as the foundation of the public education program. A state's set of student academic standards should drive every other major policy decision, from assessment and accountability to resource allocations and staff support.

In response to the greater awareness of the problems, the attention of state policymakers then moved toward establishing the accountability of schools and educators for student academic performance. As of 1999:

- 36 states published annual report cards on individual schools;
- 19 states publicly rated the performance of all schools or at least identified low-performing schools;
- 16 states had the power to close, take over, or overhaul chronically failing schools; and
- 14 states provided monetary rewards for individual schools based on performance.[34]

The political bandwagon to end social promotion has lent teeth and urgency to these accountability measures. Although sometimes it has not been pleasant to experience the

political tumult, and simplistic solutions have too often been advanced, education policymakers can be grateful that these necessary accountability policies have been able to be established and that the general public is more aware of the value of standards-driven reform. If successful, the reforms will eventually help to ensure the degree of equity that educators have long strived for.

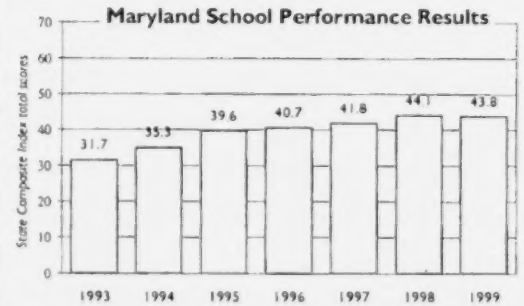
The kinds of reform measures undertaken to date can already be credited with bringing about some major improvements in school performance. *Education Week* notes that states deeply involved with standards-driven reform, including Colorado, Connecticut, and Kentucky, showed consistent and large gains from 1992 to 1998 on NAEP's 4th grade reading exam, compared to a national average that remained about the same.[35] In a recent study the Heritage Foundation identified "tangible and unyielding goals" as among the common elements of success of seven particularly high-performing schools with predominantly low-income and minority students.[36] Similarly, the Education Trust found in 1999 that 80 percent of 366 top-performing, high-poverty schools across 21 states tend to use state standards "extensively" to design curriculum and instruction, assess student work, and evaluate teachers.[37]

A valuable RAND study released in July 2000 examined the effects of state reform policies nationwide. The authors found that

> ...significant gains are occurring in math scores across most states, with sizable gains in some states. The source of these gains cannot be traced to resource changes, and the most likely explanation would suggest that *ongoing structural reform within public education might be responsible* [emphasis added]. This reform suggests that well-designed standards linked to assessments and some forms of accountability may change the incentives and productivity within public schools and even introduce competition among public schools. Thus, these results certainly challenge the traditional view of public education as "unreformable"...There are reasons to believe that improvements in achievement could be expected to continue.[38]

There is no doubt that, across the country, standards-based reforms have led to improvements in student achievement. The Appendix provides more details on states whose standards-driven policies have helped produce significant gains in student achievement. Unfortunately, states and districts are also beginning to find that, although standards, assessments, and accountability measures are making a difference, they only go so far to stimulate and sustain good academic performance. There are indications that the school performance improvements stimulated by the reforms made to date are beginning to plateau in some states. For example, Maryland is into its tenth year of an ambitious reform program characterized by rigorous standards, a comprehensive accountability strategy, and an innovative assessment system based on student demonstrations of critical thinking skills. Recent trend data from the Maryland School Performance Assessment Program indicate that the rapid progress seen in the early years of reform is slowing (see chart).[39]

Similarly, Kentucky's test scores from 1997–2000 show slowing progress after a decade of reform.[40] And while rising test-score trends indicate that the Chicago Public Schools system is now operating at a higher level of



The Composite Index (CI) is a statistic developed to provide an indication of the average performance of students across all six content areas of the Maryland School Performance Assessment Program. The target is for 70 percent of students to achieve satisfactory scores.

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productivity than it was five years ago, gains in student learning over time have recently begun to decline slightly, suggesting the possibility that productivity gains may have peaked.[41]

Some researchers note that student scores from new testing programs follow a predictable cycle, regardless of the type of test. The scores start low, rise quickly for a couple of years as teachers and students become familiar with the tests, level off for a few more years, and then gradually drop over time.[42] They say the reason that scores stagnate or fall is because schools do the easy things first and then neglect other needs. To make steady gains, costly investments into additional systemic changes, such as increasing the quality of the teaching force, are necessary.

A Growing Backlash to Hastily Adopted Reforms

Not only has achievement growth apparently hit a plateau in some states and districts, but standards-based reform is beginning to have opposition from across the political spectrum. This growing backlash movement, which includes students, parents, educators, and concerned community members, is largely a reaction to "magic bullet" and punitive approaches to the implementation of high-stakes testing, concern over large numbers of middle-class students not passing the tests, and concern over mistakes in test scoring and reporting. In the latter case, high-stakes tests have sometimes been rushed into implementation with unrealistic timelines, contributing to errors that have affected tens of thousands of students over the last several years. For example, more than 47,000 Minnesota students received incorrect scores for the year 2000 state-mandated math tests. Almost 8,000 of the students were erroneously told they failed, including up to 336 high school seniors who could have been wrongly kept from graduating because of the mistake.[43]

Adding to the problems, many states and districts are using off-the-shelf standardized tests that do not align with their own academic standards or curriculum guidelines. Teachers are not being provided with the resources, support, and professional development they need to achieve the new objectives, yet are being held directly accountable for raising test scores. Teachers are also complaining that high-stakes tests constrain the curriculum, that creative teaching methods must be abandoned in favor of drill and practice, and that they are forced to spend most of their time "teaching to the test." In Upper Arlington, Ohio, the school system reportedly abandoned its integrated curriculum and multi-age classrooms because of the pressure of the state's testing system.[44] Not surprisingly, incidents of highly stressed teachers and administrators helping students cheat on high-stakes tests fill newspapers across the country. Many people are worried that the most innovative teachers will quit the public school system.

The anti-testing backlash is increasingly cohering into an integrated national effort. Students have boycotted tests in Michigan and Massachusetts, where they rallied under the slogan "Be a hero, take a zero."[45] Grassroots parent groups have been demonstrating from Ohio to Washington State. Citizens in Colorado, Minnesota, and Virginia are putting

Rising Drop-Out Rates?

An encouraging sign of progress over the past two decades is that high school drop-out rates of African American students have steadily declined to about 13 percent in 1997, compared with 7 percent of white students, 16 percent of U.S.-born Hispanics, and nearly half of foreign-born Hispanic students. But now researchers have found several strands of evidence that correlate recent high-stakes graduation testing and grade retention practices with decreased rates of high school completion in Texas and elsewhere.[46] Correlation does not prove causation, however, and **more in-depth research is urgently needed on this question.**

pressure on legislators to rethink accountability systems.[47] Lawsuits have been filed in Arizona, California, Indiana, Louisiana, and Texas, largely on civil rights grounds. A leader of a statewide petition drive against the Ohio Proficiency Tests complains "the state has no business trying to control local school curricula."[48] In addition, concerns are also coming from a phalanx of educators and testing experts who insist that it is unwise to make promotion decisions based on a single test. Finally, many leaders of racial and ethnic communities are particularly concerned that the use of high-stakes assessments, and the higher numbers of retained students that are likely to result from current efforts to end social promotion, might set back recent major improvements in drop-out rates (see box). For example, by the end of 1999, fully 29 percent of Chicago students who were retained or sent to Transition Centers (for students who reach the age of 15 before graduating from the eighth grade) in 1997 had dropped out of school.[49]

In response, politicians and education leaders are sometimes reevaluating their demanding policies. For example, in June 1999 Wisconsin legislators responded to grassroots pressure and voted not to fund a new high school graduation test and later agreed to make the test's results only one of several criteria used to determine whether a senior graduates. That same year Massachusetts lowered the passing score on its state test, while New York and Texas established low passing scores to begin with. Ohio and Arizona are currently reconsidering their high-stakes testing programs, and several states have put off the date their new promotion or graduation requirements take effect. In 1999 the Los Angeles Unified School District adopted an ambitious plan to end social promotion and just a few months later had to scale the plan back when it became clear that 40 percent or more of the students were likely to fail the new standards.[50] Jerome Murphy, dean of the Harvard Graduate School of Education, remarked that, "I'm of the view that backpedaling is smart when you are heading over a cliff."[51]

"The National Urban League does not fear holding our children to high academic standards. We know from research and practical experience in real schools that African-American children can achieve on par with other children.... But to have a fair shot at succeeding, the education our children receive must be on par as well.

Fairness and common sense dictate that the accountability movement should be guided by sound pedagogical practice, not reckless political expediency. It's time to pause in the pell-mell rush to high standards and high-stakes tests. Time to make certain all children receive high-quality education before holding them accountable for tough standards. In other words, it's time to hold the adults who are responsible for public education accountable for their performance before sanctioning youngsters for their failure to perform."[52]

Hugh Price, President,
National Urban League

The Next Stage of Education Reform

The rising public backlash to poorly conceived or administered high-stakes tests presents an important challenge to ongoing reform. The danger is real that opposition to high-stakes testing could cause a dilution of academic standards or otherwise undermine the fundamental principles of standards-driven reform. The Study Group believes that reasonable criticisms need to be addressed and mistakes have to be corrected but without abandoning the fundamental principles of standards-driven reform. Comprehensive assessment systems tied to school accountability measures are necessary cornerstones of school improvement.

Yet realizing the promise of standards-based reform in a way that truly leaves no child behind involves even more than making neces-

sary mid-course corrections. In essence, the next stage means we must follow through with the logic of standards-driven reform, to extend and deepen reform. Extending reform involves expanding participation in early childhood education. Deepening reform means allowing, encouraging, and supporting schools and teachers to do whatever it takes to ensure that every student is able to meet the standards. This is at once relatively easy to understand and extremely difficult to accomplish on a statewide or national basis.

Traditionally, a public school has been organized to provide more or less the same educational opportunities for all its students, and it has been accepted that some students would excel and some would not. Their performance was expected to conform to the familiar "bell curve" distribution, wherein some students perform to high standards, some fail, and most fall somewhere in the middle.

These expectations are no longer valid. The "new economy" demands that every citizen be well educated. And it is a demonstrated fact that nearly all children can indeed achieve high academic standards given adequate time, customized instructional methods, and good family support. The bell curve is not an immutable fact of nature: it is merely a statistical observation of student performance in the education system as currently structured.

Instead of holding to a fixed organization and time schedule and allowing student performance to vary, a thoroughly standards-driven education system would hold student performance constant and let everything else vary. The fact is, different children struggle with different problems and they find different routes to success. Some students need additional opportunities—varied instructional practices, extra resources, different configurations of time, help from social services, etc.—to perform well. There is no single solution that will turn into reality the powerful ideal that "all children can learn." Instead, there is a veritable constellation of solutions that have been proven effective when applied with various groups of students in different circumstances. Often these solutions can be supported by reallocating existing resources or by building collaborative relationships with other child-serving agencies.

An important task of state and district policymakers is to grant schools the flexibility and resources to structure their instructional practices as necessary to ensure that every student achieves excellence. For a start, policies should be revised or repealed that dictate how much instructional time is devoted to particular subjects, limits on the kinds of instructional materials teachers can use, and decisions about resource allocations that are not based on assessed needs.

Like Gene Kranz in *Apollo 13*, education policymakers need to firmly express a clear directive to teachers and administrators that they must engineer innovative strategies and use every available tool to educate every student. When failure is not an option, the bell curve approach to education becomes obsolete.

To stay the course with education reform in the face of the growing backlash, state and local education leaders need to pay close attention to three important tasks: 1) building broad-based support for standards-driven reforms; 2) ensuring that assessments are being used appropriately; and 3) identifying and quickly remedying negative unintended consequences of reforms.

Building broad-based support for standards-driven reforms

The Study Group discovered that those states and cities that have made the most significant progress in implementing real education reforms share a common but easily overlooked factor: major stakeholder groups and political leaders have reached consensus on the need for reform, on the goal that teaching and learning

need to be at the heart of reform, and on the general outlines of how to achieve that goal.

Addressing the Study Group, Dr. Roderick of the Chicago Consortium for School Research emphasized the critical importance of Mayor Richard Daley's strong and consistent leadership as a necessary enabling factor for the city's recent education reforms, most notably his successful efforts to build a broad base of support. She pointed out that an important role of such a leader is to emphasize to the public that there will be a sharp break from past practices. Chicago has managed to establish a stable policy environment with long-term commitment from major stakeholders. She went so far as to caution any state or district against trying to implement Chicago's kinds of far-reaching policies unless there is such a firm foundation of support (and unless a substantial amount of resources and administrative capacity are dedicated to the task).

Similarly, the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, speaking of the development of early childhood education programs in United States, noted that,

> From our visits to Colorado, North Carolina, and Ohio, we became aware of the vital role of political leadership—particularly at the governor level—in stating a vision, setting priorities, and initiating the advancement of coherent policies. If this is then combined with effective state intervention policies which support and draw on strong community movements, important steps can be made toward creating a more coordinated and high-quality system of services.[53]

Kentucky, Maine, Maryland, Missouri, and Oregon offer additional examples of states with strong, steady, bipartisan support for far-reaching education reform measures. Conversely, it is not difficult to find examples where a reform measure pushed by one policy player has been torpedoed or undermined by other players with different agendas.

Building consensus is a natural task for state and local boards of education. Board members can demonstrate leadership by assembling coalitions, building political bridges, dampening ideological strife, providing goal-oriented direction that is sustained across election cycles, and assuring policy alignment. Boards can help other decision makers and the general public transcend false dichotomies and simplistic solutions that undermine efforts to help all children achieve higher standards.

State and local boards of education and administrators might object to the "get tough" attitudes expressed in today's political environment. Yet forward-thinking leaders recognize that a valuable opening has been created from the public's focused attention on the issue of social promotion. ***Education leaders can treat the current political environment as a splendid opportunity to enlist the public's support for far-reaching changes and to move further ahead with standards-driven reform.*** The political imperative to end social promotion is a chance to steer the bandwagon in a direction that leads to real improvements in student learning and greater equity.

Ensuring that assessments are being used appropriately

After examining the evidence and after much deliberation, the Study Group endorsed the general concept of high-stakes testing—with its implied threat of retention—as a necessary motivator for improved performance by many students and educators. Nevertheless, the members also emphasize the need for state assessments to be well-designed (valid, reliable, secure, and aligned with academic standards), carefully implemented, constantly evaluated, and accompanied by interventions for poorly performing students and the other reforms recommended in this report. The potential benefits of any test needs to be weighed against its cost, its potential impact on individual students, and its potential for unintended negative consequences.

Kevin McDowell, general counsel to the Indiana State Board of Education and a member of the Study Group, suggests eight considerations of legal sufficiency for state decisionmakers that might help prevent litigation over state assessments:[54]

1. There should be a clear, positive, articulated policy for the implementation and administration of any statewide assessment, as well as for the application of the results.

2. The statewide assessment must be related to the state's curriculum or the academic standards.

3. Students must have actual, meaningful opportunities to be taught the curriculum or academic standards.

4. There must be sufficient notice to the parents and students prior to the administration of the statewide assessment, especially where there is a potential sanction for failure to meet specified criteria (e.g., failure may result in the withholding of a high school diploma).

5. There should be multiple opportunities to take and pass the statewide assessment, that is, multiple opportunities to succeed.

6. There must be remediation programs available to target academic deficiencies of students as revealed by the statewide assessment.

7. State and local decisionmakers must identify and address issues related to poor academic performance, such as school attendance and poorly performing schools.

8. The statewide assessment must be designed and administered so as to assess the degree of academic ability and not the degree of disability.

The Study Group adds the practical point that quick turnaround on test results is desirable so that areas of student weakness can be addressed at the classroom and student level. The most valuable use of assessment is as a source of potentially useful information to inform teachers' judgment—as a diagnostic tool, not as a cudgel. The desire for quick turnaround, however, should not become an excuse for using low-level, multiple-choice tests: states need to recognize the importance of allocating adequate resources to score high-quality tests that can provide meaningful information about the strengths and weaknesses of individual students. Some states are finding that using classroom teachers to score performance assessments results in an added bonus: it is a good professional development activity for the teachers involved.

Identifying and quickly remedying negative unintended consequences of reforms

Among the many balancing acts boards of education must perform, one of the most challenging is to provide steady leadership for long-term, fundamental change while periodically making well-considered policy adjustments in response to implementation difficulties, newly observed problems, unintended consequences of reform measures, and changes in the political environment. Boards that are not nimble enough to maintain this balance run the risk of losing the whole ball game if the public becomes upset at a reform measure that is poorly implemented or unrealistically ambitious.

In his annual "State of American Education" speech in February 2000, U.S. Secretary of Education Richard Riley called for a "midcourse" review of standards-driven reform to ensure broad understanding and support (see box on page 25).[55] A good place to start might be with the academic standards themselves. As a cover story in the *American School Board Journal* put it, "Each state's standards are different, but they all have one thing in common: they're not perfect. Some state standards are so vague that teachers aren't sure what they mean. Others are so specific and so numerous that it's

For Guidance on the Design of a Sound Assessment System:

The report of the NASBE Study Group on Statewide Assessment Systems, *The Full Measure* (1997);

A new on-line publication from the U.S. Department of Education's Office for Civil Rights, *The Use of Tests When Making High-Stakes Decisions for Students: A Resource Guide for Educators and Policymakers*;[56] and

A recent report from the National Research Council's Committee on Appropriate Test Use, *High Stakes: Testing for Tracking, Promotion, and Graduation* (1999).[57] Below are the Committee's suggestions for basic principles of test use:

- The important thing about a test is not its validity in general, but its validity when used for a specific purpose. Thus, tests that are valid for influencing classroom practice, "leading" the curriculum, or holding schools accountable are not appropriate for making high-stakes decisions about individual student mastery unless the curriculum, the teaching, and the test(s) are aligned.
- Tests are not perfect. Test questions are a sample of possible questions that could be asked in a given area. Moreover, a test score is not an exact measure of a student's knowledge or skills. A student's score can be expected to vary across different versions of a test—within a margin of error determined by the reliability of the test—as a function of the particular sample of questions asked and/or transitory factors, such as the student's health on the day of the test. Thus, no single test score can be considered a definitive measure of a student's knowledge.
- An educational decision that will have a major impact on a test taker should not be made solely or automatically on the basis of a single test score. Other relevant information about the student's knowledge and skills should also be taken into account.
- Neither a test score nor any other kind of information can justify a bad decision. Research shows that students are typically hurt by simple retention and repetition of a grade in school without remedial and other instructional support services. In the absence of effective services for low-performing students, better tests will not lead to better educational outcomes.

impossible to cover everything in the 13 years between kindergarten and high school graduation."[58] Researchers in Washington State note that "nationwide, accountability remains a work in progress. All states spend a lot of time talking about it. Some have spent time implementing portions of it. A few have learned from their experiences and are making potentially beneficial adaptations to it... [but] no state has yet developed the 'perfect' accountability system."[59] Policymakers must continually evaluate the effects of their policies and make prompt adjustments as needed, without abandoning their goals and guiding principles. There are several recent examples of education leaders being flexible with policy implementation:

- In April 2000 the Virginia State Board of Education softened a key requirement that all high school students pass state-developed proficiency tests in order to graduate from high school, adding a provision that would allow a local school board to award a diploma to a student whose performance on the state tests "is inconsistent with other recognized indicators of academic achievement." The intention was to accommodate a small number of students who might not be good test takers but

would be able to show evidence of skills mastery.[60]

- Until this year, Texas schools were given wide latitude to exempt special education students and students with limited English proficiency from taking state tests. The result was that 5 percent of white students, nearly 12 percent of black students, and 13 percent of Latino students were exempted in 1999, which represented more than 37,000 additional exemptions compared to the previous year.[61] Recognizing that the state testing program was being undermined, the Texas State Board of Education has tightened the waiver requirements.

- In 1998 the Maryland State Board of Education voted to create a K-12 program of remediation assistance for students at risk of failure. The $49 million plan includes state funding for early childhood education, close monitoring of student progress in reading and math, and mandatory summer instruction for students performing below grade level at the end of 8th grade. When the Governor and state legislature failed to fund the program, the state board voted to delay implementation of its new graduation requirements, explaining that it would not be fair to the students.

A sound policymaking process could be seen as circular, beginning with a consensus of state leaders to determine standards; ensuring widespread understanding of expectations for students and schools; aligning courses of study, curriculum, and instruction; developing and administering state and local aligned assessments; and then using the results to help determine inputs. As experience grows, the various steps of the process are refined.

Some Key Questions for Policymakers to Ask

A key skill for policymakers is to use "the power of the question," that is, to ask good questions that can help drive policymaking. Following are types of questions that education decision makers can use to stimulate and steer far-ranging discussions about ending social promotion:

- *What are the current policies regarding a student's academic performance and progress through school?*
- *How many students are being promoted to the next grade without performing to the proper level? How many are being retained in grade? How many are dropping out?*
- *How are decisions made about promoting/retaining special education students and students with limited English proficiency?*
- *How early do we know if students show indications of academic failure?*
- *Do we understand why students are failing? What are common characteristics of low-performing students?*
- *What kinds of assistance are currently being provided to students at risk of academic failure? By whom? How and when?*
- *Do we have existing resources that could be reallocated to programs designed to provide extra help to low-performing students?*
- *Whose support do we need to succeed in a major initiative to improve schools?*
- *Do any policies inhibit educators' ability to tailor instructional programs to students' individual needs?*

Excerpts from Secretary Richard Riley's "State of American Education" Address, February 2000

We are at a critical juncture in raising standards. As standards move from the statehouse to the schoolhouse, the debate is growing louder. While some of the debate reflects opposition to higher standards and stronger accountability, much of it is occurring because there is a gap between what we know we should be doing and what we are doing.

This is the first time all 50 states have ever tried something so ambitious, so it is important that we have a "midcourse" review....[L]et me suggest some guiding principles.

First: have a healthy and ongoing dialogue with parents and teachers. The ultimate success of this effort depends on our teachers and principals and it requires us to go the extra mile to make sure that parents understand and support their efforts. State leaders and educators need to listen hard to legitimate concerns. Involve the entire community and avoid the "here's the test" top-down approach of putting assessments in place.

Second: states must make sure that their standards are challenging—and realistic. No one believes in the power of higher expectations more than I do. But setting high expectations does not mean setting them so high that they are unreachable except for only a few. If we do that, we will frustrate teachers and parents and break the spirit of children who are working hard to improve but get no credit for their effort. It's far better to ratchet up standards a step at a time than to try to make one huge leap all at once. A strong emphasis on improvement rather than on failure will allow us to fly the flag of excellence over many more of our schools.

Third: you can't improve something you can't measure—we have to create quality assessments that have a direct connection to the standards. If all of our efforts to raise standards get reduced to one test, we've gotten it wrong. If we force our best teachers to teach only to the test, we will lose their creativity and even lose some of them from the classroom. If we are so consumed with making sure students pass a multiple-choice test that we throw out the arts and civics then we will be going backwards instead of forward.

Students must be tested on the most challenging aspects of state standards in addition to the basic skills. All states should incorporate multiple ways of measuring learning-essays and extended responses, portfolios and performance assessments, as well as multiple choice tests. Every test should have as its ultimate purpose helping the child who takes the test....

Fourth: invest wisely to improve teaching and learning. Talk alone won't get the job done. As states continue to implement standards, they must also invest in their teachers and students. Invest in sustained professional development. Expand summer school and after-school programs.

I support high-stakes tests including high school exit exams. At the same time, you have to help students and teachers prepare for these tests—they need the preparation time and the resources to succeed, and the test must be on matters that they have been taught.

Fifth: insist on real accountability for results. We must not be deterred from insisting that our schools be accountable for results—for making progress each year to reach challenging standards. We can't wait for the perfect test before we hold schools accountable. We must act now and give schools the help they need. And if a school is truly struggling we should not be afraid to reconstitute it or close it down and start over.

I also firmly believe in standards for promotion and graduation. I am, however, deeply concerned about places where ending social promotion is a hurried response to political pressure, rather than a well-conceived plan for achieving success. Setting standards in January and testing in June is not realistic or fair. Promotion standards must be phased in sensibly, not rushed. This is a step by step process.

Students must have multiple opportunities to demonstrate competence, and educators should rely on more than one measure to make a final decision. And don't give up on students who still don't meet the promotion standards. We should be creating alternatives that provide them with intensive help.

Chapter 3
An Early Start

Recommendation:
Establish universally available opportunities for quality preschool education.

An abundance of research and credible program evaluations offer compelling evidence that comprehensive pre-kindergarten education combining social and health services can enhance children's cognitive, social, and language development and later school success.[62] High-quality pre-kindergarten programs are associated with higher math and reading scores, stronger learning skills, increased creativity, better school attendance, improved health, and greater involvement by parents in their children's education. These studies also indicate that program effects are greatest for children from low-income and/or non-English-speaking families.[63] Furthermore, extensive research into brain development is finding that young children are more capable learners than current practices reflect.[64]

In a study of retention using nationally representative data from 1991-1994, children who were destined to be retained in the next year started first grade at a serious disadvantage. They scored 51 points lower on a reading comprehension test, 62 points lower on a reading vocabulary test, and 78 points lower on a math test compared to students who were to be promoted. These are significant differences, and the gaps grew even wider from the start to the finish of first grade.[65] Conversely, students who attended preschool were significantly less likely to be retained in the early elementary grades. Additional protective factors included being rated by their teacher as motivated and not having trouble paying attention, attitudes which preschool can help develop.

The National Research Council recently conducted an exhaustive review of the importance of literacy skills in young children and the need for early support to ensure attainment of reading proficiency upon school entry.[66] The report makes a convincing case for the need of some children, in particular children from poor, minority, and non-English-speaking families, for high-quality preschool and excellent literacy instruction to ensure reading proficiency. The Council's findings include the following:

- Regardless of the specific explanation, differences in literacy achievement among children as a result of socioeconomic status are pronounced and continue throughout schooling.
- High school graduation can be predicted with reasonable accuracy by knowing someone's reading skill at the end of grade 3. A person who is not at least a modestly skilled reader by the end of third grade is quite unlikely to graduate from high school.
- Children benefit from experiences in early childhood that foster language develop-

ment, cultivate a motivation to read, and establish a link between print and spoken words.

One study tracked a group of disadvantaged children over a period of two decades—some who attended an intensive child-care program and others from a regular program—and found that those in the former group were more likely to attend college, hold jobs, and delay parenthood.[67] When pre-kindergarten programs are targeted toward disadvantaged populations, cost-effectiveness analyses show major savings to society over the long term from reductions in grade retention, special education placement, drop out rates, criminal activity, and welfare utilization.[68] Research conducted by Florida State University's Center for Prevention and Early Intervention Policy estimates that every dollar invested in quality preschool programs saves up to $7.16 in other costs to society.[69]

The recent RAND report mentioned earlier examined NAEP score trends from 1990 through 1996 to identify common policies among states where scores for students from similar families were significantly above the median.[70] The report identified higher public pre-kindergarten participation as one of the common features of the high-scoring states, in addition to other factors including lower pupil-teacher ratios and adequacy of resources for teaching.

The Current State of Early Childhood Education

Spurred by these compelling research findings, the public education system has inevitably become more involved, both directly and indirectly, in the pre-primary years of childhood. Numerous organizations including NASBE have issued calls for comprehensive infrastructure to support early childhood programs, particularly for children living in poverty.[71] At the first National Education Summit hosted by President George Bush in 1989, state governors endorsed as their first goal, "By the year 2000, all children in America will start school ready to learn."

A number of community-level initiatives to expand and raise the quality of early childhood education have flourished in recent years.[72] Some of these forward-looking initiatives have been expanded into statewide collaborative efforts including North Carolina's "Smart Start" program, the "Educare Colorado" coalition, the "Ohio Family and Children First" initiative, and South Carolina's "First Steps" program.

During the 1990s most states began formulating agendas to ensure that all students would have access to high quality pre-kindergarten programs. In 1998, 44 states reported to the National Governors Association that they were working on child care quality issues.[73] Seventeen governors acknowledged the importance of early childhood development in their year 2000 state-of-the-state messages.[74] Over the last decade, total state spending expanded from approximately $700 million to nearly $1.7 billion, while the number of children participating in state programs has increased from approximately 290,000 to 725,000.[75] Texas, Wisconsin, and Maryland lead states in the percentage of 4th grade students who have attended public pre-K programs.

As a result of these efforts, the gap in preschool participation between 3- to 5-year-olds from high- and low-income families has decreased in recent years. According to the National Education Goals Panel, in 1991 73 percent of 3- to 5-year-olds from families earning over $50,000 a year attended preschool, compared to only 45 percent of children from families earning $10,000 a year or less. By 1999, participation rates for children from high-income families was 70 percent compared to 57 percent participation for children of low-income families.[76] During that time, then, the gap narrowed from 28 to 13 percentage points. Nevertheless, this still means that huge numbers of children from low-income families are not participating.

Even as state and local communities invest at higher levels in early childhood education for children living in poverty, these investments are often made without specific planning to address early literacy needs, organizational structures and scheduling, funding, and collaboration with health and social agencies. Much confusion surrounds their operational nature, costs, and administrative control. Turf battles persist among the major professional communities, often confronting each other with respect to basic philosophical objectives and methodologies.[77] Many programs fail to offer sufficient assurances that the programs are of the quality necessary to foster children's development.[78]

Surveys of state-funded preschool programs indicate a high level of variability in early childhood education policies across the United States.[79] A report by the Children's Defense Fund found that pre-kindergarten policies differ from state to state on almost every count, including original goals, administrative structures, distribution of funds, the types of agencies operating programs, quality standards, and the scope of supports provided to children and families.[80] For example, some states have developed pre-K curricula or adopted whole school reform models like Success for All and Core Knowledge. Other states simply supplement federal Head Start programs, while still others provide only minimal guidelines to meet health and safety codes.

Individual state guidelines vary considerably in the minimum standards for teachers considered acceptable. Gross funding inequities also exist: in 11 states there is no state funding at all for either pre-kindergarten or Head Start.[81] Even compulsory attendance policies vary widely, from a low of age 5 in seven states, to a high of age 8 in two states as of 1995. As one group of researchers described the situation,

> Each state has its own unique demography, geography, funding structure, political climate and ideology, and administrative style.... The state-to-state variability in preschool programming results in a patchwork of requirements and services.[82]

Five Policy Priorities

Clearly, school readiness and literacy development have an important role in heading off social promotion or retention later in a child's school career. In order to foster children's language and literacy and ensure their readiness to learn upon school entry, policymakers need to assure greater coordination, adequate resources, increased access, and improved overall quality.[83] The challenge for states and school districts is how to capitalize on local resources and local partnerships, while at the same time ensuring that an overall regulatory structure is in place to sustain and develop quality services.

Following are five of the most critical areas that policymakers need to address:

1. Establish a statewide process for developing coherent early childhood education policies. One of the key issues at the heart of the quality debate relates to reducing the fragmentation in policies and practices across states and communities. The disparate array of public and private early childhood services has resulted in an inequality of resources and lack of communication about good teaching practices. States have the opportunity to utilize their authority to provide a comprehensive, cohesive, evidence-based, well-resourced system of early childhood education to accomplish the goals of access and greater school and literacy readiness. North Carolina's Smart Start early childhood initiative provides a good example of how this can be accomplished (see box).

Early childhood education policies should be well articulated with the state education goals to provide for a "seamless" system of education across multiple levels. A good planning process enhances collaboration between the public and private sectors and among education agencies, child care providers, health and human services agencies, training institutions, and researchers. The process

Smart Start: The North Carolina Early Childhood Initiative

Smart Start is a collaborative initiative between state government and partners at the local level. These include representatives of the business community, service providers, families, and community and religious leaders. Launched in 1993 by Governor Jim Hunt, Smart Start was one of the first collaborative efforts set up to improve the quality and management of services for children under age 6 and their families. Smart Start activities are coordinated by the North Carolina Partnership for Children, a non-profit corporation established to administer state funds specifically for this purpose.

Smart Start is not just a single program or intervention. Instead, it is a community-based, comprehensive, public–private initiative that provides a framework for pooling resources, developing plans to match the needs of local communities, and providing affordable and accessible education and preventive health services for children and families. At present, Smart Start is operated in more than half the state's 100 counties, and the goal is to ensure universal provision for those families who need and require it. Funding sources are both private and public. State allocations have increased from $20 million in 1993 to $220 million in 1999.

A recent study found that Smart Start has "generated incredible energy and engagement"; brought together agencies that had never worked together before; helped to integrate services that were previously working alongside one another; involved the business community; involved the families of young children; helped teachers to become better educated; and reduced staff turnover rates.[84]

should include input from diverse stakeholders and a variety of experts, and allow for continuous evaluation and policy refinement.

A good consensus-building process can help a state avoid adopting contradictory or uncoordinated policies leading to unintended or negative outcomes. For example, the Study Group found that active local leadership is key to getting children into the system, but sometimes well-intended state policies can constrain local efforts to develop responsive, effective early childhood programs.

2. Adopt program standards. Reflecting a consensus of views of scholars in the area of early childhood education, the National Research Council recommends that "all states should develop program standards for early childhood programs and monitor their implementation."[85] The National Education Goals Panel suggests that, "because research has identified content that is appropriate and important for inclusion in early childhood programs, content and methods standards should be developed and evaluated regularly to ascertain whether they adhere to current scientific understanding of children's learning."[86] For example, state policies need to allow for variability in children's development and culture. Other suggested policy components include:

- program accreditation;
- facility licensing;
- school–home relationships;
- class size and student–teacher ratios;
- guidance on establishing private–public partnerships;
- governance within agencies and across public and private institutions;
- use of assessments;
- provision of unmet nutritional, health care, and social service needs;
- state-level technical assistance and monitoring for quality; and
- external accountability.

The National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) has developed Criteria for High-Quality Early Childhood Programs that can be used to help evaluate the quality and comprehensiveness of statewide policies regarding early childhood intervention. The standards address program goals, curriculum, relationships among teachers and families, staff qualifications, professional development, administration, staffing, physical environment, health and safety, nutrition services, and continuous improvement. These standards have earned national recognition as an effective strategy for improving program quality and identifying high-quality programs.[87]

As an example of what states can do, in April 2000 the New Jersey State Department of Education published *Early Childhood Education Program Expectations: Standards of Quality*, a comprehensive guide for educators designed to support and prepare young children to meet the state's Core Curriculum Content Standards.

3. Expand affordable access. Nationally, more children from low-income families are participating in early childhood education programs than ever before, but some 43 percent are still not participating. In many states, program eligibility criteria are broad, but funding support is grossly inadequate. For example, Tennessee's early childhood initiative reaches only 2 percent of eligible children and Massachusetts' initiative serves less than one-quarter of eligible children, whereas Ohio is providing a Head Start early childhood experience for nearly nine out of ten children in poverty.[88]

Some policymakers have decided to make voluntary preschool available to everyone regardless of income because many middle-income families also have trouble finding and paying for quality preschool services. Currently Georgia reaches a higher proportion of four-year-old children than any other state—more than 70 percent—through its voluntary, lottery-funded prekindergarten program.[89] Oklahoma and New York are among those starting to make early childhood education universally available.

Georgia's experience to date illustrates the problems that can arise from the fragmentary nature of early childhood education. The state funds preschool programs in day-care centers, public school buildings, YMCAs, recreation centers, military bases, and even in churches if they pledge not to provide religious instruction during class hours. But one factor that interferes with the effort to provide universal prekindergarten education for all four-year-olds is that participation in the state-funded program is voluntary for public schools and other providers. The result is that there may not be enough spaces in every community for all families who wish to participate.[90]

Some states have initiated policies to create differential reimbursement rates that provide higher subsidies to eligible families who use accredited programs than to those who use non-accredited programs.[91] This strategy has been used to help make high-quality programs more accessible to families with low incomes and enable accredited programs to maintain the quality of services for all families they serve.

Additional policy areas related to the accessibility issue include transportation, provision of health and human services, and assistance to help overcome linguistic barriers to communication with families.

4. Provide adequate number of well-prepared teachers. A growing body of research repudiates the commonly held misperception that teachers of young children need little formal education and training.[92] Research shows that the more training and preparation that early care and education practitioners have, the more skilled they become at helping young children get ready for the demands of elementary school. For example, when practitioners are better educated and attend more training, the children in their care tend to engage in more complex play.[93] As evidence that there is a growing respect for the intellectual challenges of early childhood education, the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards (NBPTS) has developed

standards for highly accomplished early childhood specialists.

Chapter 5 of this report addresses policy issues for the overall improvement of teacher quality. Of particular importance to the area of early childhood education is the need for adequate resources to build a stable, culturally diverse teaching force. Given the low compensation that typically characterizes the field, numerous early children and school-age care programs face severe problems in attracting and retaining well-qualified professionals.[94] Inadequate compensation is associated with high rates of turnover and lower program quality.[95] To bring coherence to compensation systems and also help improve teacher quality, the National Education Goals Panel suggests that a single career ladder for early childhood teachers that includes differentiated skill levels should be specified by each state, as Connecticut, New York, and Ohio are doing (see box).[96]

Studies find that training requirements for early child care and education practitioners are sparse across the nation, and professional development opportunities are limited. Early childhood teachers receive only about ten hours of ongoing training annually, typically at their own centers or at community colleges.[97] The box on page 32 summarizes recommendations for professional development determined by the National Research Council.

Finally, at present there is no coordinated cross-state qualifications system for early childhood workers. Another appropriate task for state-level education policymakers is to work toward consistency across states and negotiate agreements for reciprocal recognition of teacher licensing and certification.

5. Ensure that assessments are used properly. The Study Group learned that tests used to assess young children's progress are sometimes developmentally inappropriate or the results are being misused. Experts say that gathering accurate information from young children is difficult and potentially stressful, and the younger the child, the more difficult it is to obtain reliable and valid assessment data.[98] For example, abstract paper-and-pencil tasks may make it difficult for young children to show what they know.

Early childhood education assessments should be used for instructional improvement, not for purposes of accountability. A salient finding from Chicago is that the threat of retention appears to be a poor strategy for motivating academic success among younger students, who might not understand its importance.[99]

The National Education Goals Panel suggests that assessments of young children should address the full range of early learning and development, including physical well-being and motor development; social and emotional development; approaches toward learning; language development; and cognition and general knowledge.[100] NAEYC believes that the most important consideration in evaluating and using standardized tests is the *utility criterion*, i.e., "the purpose of testing must be to improve services for children and ensure that children benefit from their educational experiences."[101]

Articulating Early Childhood Teacher Qualifications in Ohio

The Early Childhood Education Office of the Ohio Department of Education has introduced a step-by-step process that is currently being implemented in a number of counties. First, clarify which staff are to be classified as "teachers" and develop a career pathway with the help of the model suggested by the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC); second, identify the core component of the base level of certification; third, identify the training necessary to entering the career path at any one specific point; and fourth, establish a register of teachers to guarantee quality.

Recommendations concerning Early Childhood Teachers from the National Research Council

- Each group of children in an early childhood education and care program should be assigned a teacher who has a bachelor's degree with specialized education related to early childhood.
- Education programs for teachers should provide them with a stronger and more specific foundational knowledge of the development of children's social and affective behavior, thinking, and language.
- Teacher education programs should require mastery of information on the pedagogy of teaching preschool-aged children.
- A critical component of pre-service preparation should be a supervised, relevant student teaching or internship experience in which new teachers receive ongoing guidance and feedback from a qualified supervisor.
- All early childhood education and child care programs should have access to a qualified supervisor of early childhood education.
- Federal and state departments of education, human services, and other agencies interested in young children and their families should initiate programs of research and development aimed at learning more about effective preparation of early childhood teachers.

From *Eager to Learn: Educating Our Preschoolers* (1999)

Summary of Suggested State Policies and Actions

1. **Establish a statewide process for developing coherent early childhood education policies.**
2. **Adopt comprehensive program standards.**
3. **Expand affordable access to high-quality early childhood education programs.**
4. **Provide for an adequate number of well-prepared teachers.**
5. **Ensure that assessments for young children are designed and used properly.**

Chapter 4
Improving Opportunities for Success

Recommendation:
Allow local districts and schools flexibility to structure curriculum, instructional practices, and classroom time so that every student is continually engaged in learning and receives helping interventions as needed to achieve academic standards.

Policymakers and educators who are working hard to deliver on the promise that all children can learn are finding that, truly, there are no simple solutions. As researchers report ever more compelling findings about the value of early childhood education, policymakers might be tempted to devote the bulk of their attention and resources to this preventive strategy as if it could completely solve the problem of poor student achievement. Yet even the strongest advocates for universal access to quality pre-kindergarten programs acknowledge that early childhood education is no silver bullet. The barriers that impede students' achievement cannot suddenly be neutralized in a year or two. Complementary helping strategies and interventions need to be on-going throughout students' academic careers.

States, districts, and schools are applying a number of strategies to increase student achievement and reduce the incidence of failure. As education leaders develop policies and programs to help students progress through school, they should consider the following approaches:

Curriculum and Instructional Practices

Establish high expectations for achievement. Research finds that student achievement is correlated with high expectations on the part of teachers and the belief that their students can do well. An academic press from teachers to reach high levels needs to be accompanied by a positive social context in which a student's teachers, peers, and family support the belief that the student can succeed. Therefore it is important that states make sure that students, school staff members, and families "buy into" challenging academic goals and are confident about the attainability of the standards.

Use instructional approaches tailored to students' needs and skill levels. Students come to school with varying skill levels and learning styles. A one-size-fits-all instructional approach does not in fact fit all. Too often students who are beginning to fall behind end up in classes using worksheet and rote approaches that have limited effectiveness. We

know a lot about instructional strategies that engage students, facilitate their acquisition of the basic skills, and lead to higher order thinking skills. We also know that schools need to adopt approaches that address the educational needs of their particular populations. While there is no single answer, there are many proven practices that can be employed. For example, approaches like cooperative learning allow heterogeneous groups of students to work together with outcomes that benefit low-achievers.

Tie the curriculum to the standards. Students will never reach the standards if they have no opportunity to learn to the standards before being tested on them. Yet schools are often slow to make necessary changes in their curricula. In examining how Chicago schools responded to new anti-social promotion polices, the Consortium on Chicago School Research found that in many classes the pace of instruction had not kept up with the grade level curriculum and testing demands. This was in part because teachers who were tired of seeing the "reform du jour" come and go had simply shut down and refused to rework the curriculum to meet the new, higher standards.[102]

Similarly, in a study of how Indiana schools used funds allocated for remediation of students failing a graduation qualifying test, the researchers found that 42 percent of the funding had been used to simply revise the existing curriculum.[103] Schools struggling to meet new achievement standards may need state help in adapting their curriculum to the new requirements and making the necessary changes.

Continually monitor student progress. Schools need to be able to use test data connected to the standards and other information to track student progress on a timely basis. Knowing that a student is starting to lag gives teachers an opportunity to intervene before that student falls far behind. Disaggregating test data can help teachers identify specific areas of need, gaps in the curriculum, or groups that need extra attention.

Most educators have had little training or experience in using data in this way. Many states have begun providing technical assistance to districts and schools on data collection and use. To facilitate an early response when students are having difficulty, states and districts also have had to ensure that there is a quick turnaround on test scores and that scoring is accurate.

Provide intervention and support services. When a student starts to fall behind, teachers and schools should be able to provide appropriate interventions in a timely manner to help that student catch up. In addition to academic support, the interventions may also include other kinds of health, social, and family support services to help address barriers to learning. These might be provided by the school, but more often schools refer students in need of assistance to collaborating agencies using their own funding sources. For a more complete discussion of support services for students, see *The Future Is Now: Addressing Social Issues in Schools of the 21st Century*, the 1999 report of the NASBE Study Group on Confronting Social Issues: The Role of Schools.

As an example of what states can do to systemize the provision of support services, New York State policy requires that once a child demonstrates below grade level achievement, the school must develop an Academic Intervention Services (AIS) plan for that student. The types of assistance that the state helps to fund can range from additional instruction or time with the teacher, to counseling, to social or health services.

Apply consequences to school administration and staff. Educators need to have a stake in student success. In a survey of 366 high-poverty schools that had demonstrated high achievement or progress toward state standards, the Education Trust found that two-thirds of the schools were operating in systems that held adults (teachers, principals, superintendents) accountable to some extent for achievement.[104] Consequences should include a

A Sampler of State, District, and School Multi-Strategy Approaches toward Student Success

Researchers have begun identifying the key policies underlying recent successes in increasing student achievement. The studies are confirming that no matter what level of governance, student gains have been linked to an array of complementary approaches rather than any one single action. Following are descriptions of three major studies, which found similar results:

First, in a 1998 study for the National Education Goals Panel, David Grissmer and Ann Flanagan analyzed why North Carolina and Texas made such strong, sustained gains in the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) scores from 1990 to 1996.[105] They found the gains took place in similar environments, characterized by strong political and business leadership for education reform and consistency in the states' reform agendas that survived changes in key elected officials. Moreover, starting in the late 1980s, both states enacted similar policies over several years that the researchers considered to be the most plausible reasons for improved student performance. These included:

- adoption of statewide standards by grade and subject for clear teaching objectives;
- holding all students to the same standards;
- development of statewide assessments closely linked to academic standards;
- provision of increased local control and flexibility for administrators and teachers to adopt varying approaches to meet the standards;
- establishment of computerized feedback systems and the provision of data for continuous improvement; and
- shifting resources to schools with more disadvantaged students.

Second, in a survey of its membership, the Council of the Great City Schools collected data on academic progress and district/school practices identified as helping reduce the achievement gap between racial, ethnic, and socioeconomic groups.[106] Between 1994 and 1998, the Fort Worth and Houston Independent School Districts registered significant increases as measured by the percentage of students passing the Texas Assessment of Academic Skills (TAAS). Not only did the percentage passing increase across racial, ethnic, and economic groups, but there was a substantial reduction in the gap that existed between the groups. Among the promising practices identified by the two districts were:

- individual schools allowed to choose programs that best fit their students' needs;
- benchmark testing and interpretation;
- academic interventions during the school year;
- instructional support teams;
- provision of tutoring and summer school programs; and
- additional staff development.

Finally, in 1999, the Education Trust reported on a survey of 366 elementary and secondary schools in 21 states.[107] The schools all shared a common characteristic: although 50 percent or more of their students lived in poverty, they also represented top scoring and/or most improving schools on state tests. Survey results highlighted a pattern of six general practices across the schools. These included:

- extensive use of state standards to design curriculum and instruction, assess student work, and evaluate teachers;
- increased provision of reading and math instructional time in order to help students meet standards;
- allocation of significant funds to support professional development focused on changing instructional practice;
- implementation of comprehensive systems to monitor individual student progress and provide extra support to students as soon as it is needed;
- efforts to involve parents helping students meet standards; and
- operation under state or district accountability with real consequences for adults in the school.

mix of incentives and rewards for good performance, and sanctions for unacceptable performance.[108]

While the buck often seems to stop at the school and student levels, addressing student achievement really depends on the development of complementary policies across all levels of education governance. Standards drive the process, but how well each level of governance provides support for students to achieve those standards ultimately determines whether both social promotion and retention will be avoided. The box on the preceding page provides a sampler of strategies that have a successful track record.

Providing the Time and Resources for Success

The consequence of setting a goal of high achievement for all students is providing each student with the opportunity to achieve that goal. Traditionally, academic achievement has been correlated with seat time. Students spending a given number of hours in the classroom are expected to reach the goals of a particular grade or curriculum. The commitment that all students will learn stretches the time frame for some and recognizes students will reach the goals using a number of routes. For states, districts, and schools, the challenge is to find enough time and resources for every student to succeed.

Finding the time

Instructional time spent in school is correlated to some degree with the achievement of all students, and the relationship is particularly strong for disadvantaged and low-performing students. Yet these are the very students more likely to get less real instruction time than other students. Students at risk of failure often lack motivation and their attendance suffers. As students get older they get jobs, have to stay home with younger children, or have children themselves. A recent report on truancy in the District of Columbia indicated that 15 percent of high school students fail to show up on any given day, compared to truancy rates one-third that size in the affluent suburbs.[109] It is hard to succeed under those circumstances. A study on the effects of absenteeism on Rochester students found that students who attended only 85 percent of the time scored below the 54th percentile in the New York English Regents exam, while those with 93 percent attendance scored at or above the 85th percentile.[110]

Yet when students *are* in school, they may still find only part of the school day is dedicated to instruction. In poorly managed schools, students can lose as much as half the academic time to fragmented schedules, poor class management, special programs and events, and a decline in academic class work the last weeks of the school year. Even though most states' policies set minimum requirements for instructional time, such schools are chronically unable to meet the requirements.[111]

Finally, while all students lose some of the skills and knowledge they gained during the school year over extended summer breaks, the "summer slide," as it is known, tends to be greater for low-income students. This is especially true of reading. Studies show that middle-class students, exposed to more opportunities to read books, continue to improve reading performance over the summer while low-income students experience a loss. As a result, the gap between the two sets of students may accumulate and grow larger with each summer break, even if both achieve the same pace of learning during the school year.

Gaining more time within the school day. Schools can be very creative in finding ways to incorporate additional learning opportunities into the existing schedule. Students lagging in key skills can be assigned to pull-out programs or find their study hall time dedicated to remedial sessions. Students needing extra help can spend lunch time with a volunteer tutor. Even suspended students can be reeled back

into "suspension school" so they can continue their learning. However, these approaches generally are piecemeal and represent a fraction of the time students spend in school. Schools and districts can tap into systemic strategies that provide more sustained support to students.

Attendance programs. Aggressive monitoring of student attendance can both improve poor attendance and serve as a preventive measure. For example, Success for All, a reading program geared to low-performing schools, includes a 95 percent attendance rate as a goal of the program. School officials are urged to call students' homes right after home room teachers record an absence and try to facilitate truant students' return to the school that same day so they can attend the reading block. The program also advocates preventive strategies, such as enlisting the family's support or providing incentives for attendance. Interventions can include letters home, wake-up calls, and escort services. Chronic offenders might be enrolled in a "Sunshine Club," which meets before school and provides activities that motivate children to be more positive about coming to school.

Looping/multi-year teaching. Keeping the same teacher for more than one year can reduce start-up time and promote a caring relationship between teacher and student. It also provides extra time for teachers to bring low-performing students up to grade level. Teachers can stay with students over a multi-year period, but the most common format is looping, in which the teacher stays with the same class for a two-year cycle. Teachers estimate that looping can add an extra month of instructional time in the second year.[112]

Block scheduling. Reconfiguring the daily schedule to cover fewer subjects over longer time periods provides more time for instruction and eliminates the time lost to more frequent changing of classes. Variations on this approach, such as the Copernican schedule, allow low-performing students to concentrate on fewer subjects at one time and take "double doses" in subjects and skills where they need more help. The need to fill longer class periods also encourages teachers to go beyond lectures and use more interactive, hands-on instructional approaches that engage students in learning.

Smaller classes/reduced student loads. While reducing class size can benefit all students, research finds that the effect is greatest for disadvantaged and minority students. Tennessee's Project STAR study documented both greater short-term and long-term positive achievement effects for students assigned to smaller classes during the primary grades. In particular, students in smaller classes were less likely to be retained and teachers tended to identify students' needs earlier. For upper elementary grades, studies find that students demonstrate increased academic achievement when less than 20 students are assigned to the class.

Low-performing secondary students also benefit when teachers have lower student loads. Urban high school teachers who can be assigned as many as 150 or more students throughout the day have scant time to identify individual needs, let alone help the lowest performers catch up with the rest of the class. Students' needs are much more likely to be addressed when teachers' loads are reduced to a total of 80 students and teachers work in teams with the same set of students.

Year-round education. Reconfiguring the school calendar can help students at risk of school failure by ameliorating the summer slide effect through shorter breaks between school sessions and by using those breaks to provide enrichment activities. The approach adds days, and therefore instruction time, to the school calendar and gives students the opportunity to receive timely remedial help during the intercessions.

Adding time outside of the school day. Programs operating outside the school day give

students more opportunities to learn and benefit from enriched environments. These venues usually involve smaller groups and more individualized attention. Moreover, when students voluntarily spend their own time, they tend to take more responsibility for their learning. There are a wide variety of activities outside school that assist students at risk of school failure, but none substitutes for sustained, strong instruction in regular school.

After-school programs are a popular form of extra help although they often serve other purposes, such as providing safe, enriched environments for latch-key children. The extended learning opportunities offered in these programs are particularly helpful when they build on the regular school day. Characteristics of effective after-school programs include small-group instruction, professional instructors, coordination with school-day instruction, frequent assessments and attendance incentives.

After-school programs often incorporate *tutoring* and *mentoring* activities. These one-on-one approaches provide an opportunity to target assistance to the student's specific needs. They also link students to caring adults who relate the importance of succeeding in school to adult life. However, the academic effectiveness of these programs depends on their implementation. Because the tutors are generally volunteers from the community, they need both content and instructional training to be effective. Also, students are best served when the tutors are supported and linked with the student's teachers and course work, and when the student's progress is frequently monitored and assessed.

Summer school can be an effective way of helping low-performing students catch up and prevent retention. While programs like the Summer Bridge in Chicago have helped students reach the next grade, the intervention does not necessarily convert to sustained academic success. As with other "extra help" approaches, summer school cannot compensate for other obstacles, such as poor instruction during the school year or low student motivation and expectations.

A variation that could help low performers is to employ a "running start" strategy by pushing the summer school schedule back against the start up of the new school year. Students lose less time at the beginning of the

A Five-Year High School Program

A recent initiative offers low performers increased time to earn a high school diploma.[13] Beginning in the 2000-2001 school year, students in Rochester, New York, can choose one of three different "pathways" to a high school diploma that take into account the varying time students need to reach the established academic standards. In addition to the traditional four-year route, students have the option of taking three or five years to complete high school. The five-year program has two configurations: for grade 8-12 and 9-13.

The five-year pathway offers low-performing students several advantages:

- they can focus and spend more time by taking fewer courses each semester;
- they can schedule double periods in subjects where they need more help; and
- if they meet the standards during the fifth year, they can use the remaining time to take additional courses, including college-level or technical courses.

school year having already gotten back into the routine of class work, and there is less need to spend the beginning of the new school year reviewing what was learned the previous year.

Targeting resources

Helping all students make it through school requires both adding to and redistributing existing education resources. Effective interventions require qualified staffing, adequate materials, and space. Most schools need professional development and technical assistance to learn how to monitor student progress and respond with appropriate curriculum and instruction.

Much of the needed resources can be reallocated from existing budgets. Redirecting funding can be controversial when education constituencies perceive that monies and learning opportunities are being withdrawn from other students for the benefit of a selected population. However, many of the strategies that help low-performing students also benefit others. When the changes are systemic to the school and result in more effective curriculum and instruction, better tracking of student progress, and provision of timely assistance, all students benefit.

Some states and districts are developing allocation systems to provide more funds to schools with students who need additional support. In 1997, Seattle introduced a weighted student formula based on the degree of difficulty involved in educating a student.[114] The district had previously been using a formula keyed to staffing and based on the number of students in the school, and this approach had not reflected the specific needs of those students. The district replaced it with a weighted student formula in which the dollars followed the student. The amount of money that goes with each student depends on the characteristics of that student. In addition to the base amount allocated for every student, additional funds are assigned for special education, bilingual, poverty, and test score factors. The formula heavily weights funds for poverty because of the correlation with lower academic performance and adds funds for low test scores because those students need additional help.

Besides direct funding formulas, states can target resources in other ways. When educators explored how Illinois could support low-performing schools with interventions like pre-kindergarten programs that would require additional funding, they found resources available that districts and schools had not taken advantage of. For example, low-performing schools rarely applied for or received categorical grants for science literacy, urban education, or service learning. Through technical assistance and monitoring, states could help schools not only access existing funding programs, but integrate or pool myriad funding streams toward specific interventions.[115]

How States Can Encourage School Improvement

While the buck often seems to stop at the school and student level, addressing student achievement really depends on the development of complementary policies across all levels of education governance. How well each level of governance provides support for students to achieve challenging academic standards ultimately determines whether both social promotion and retention will be avoided.

States can actively help low-performing schools turn themselves around. One lesson from education reform efforts to date is that educators need to have a stake in student success. In 1998, NASBE's Study Group on Education Accountability recommended that student academic performance should result in predictable consequences for school administration and staff; such consequences include a mix of incentives and rewards for good performance, sanctions for unacceptable performance, and helping interventions for districts and schools in need of improvement.[116]

States have also come to realize that local schools and districts might lack adequate

Technical Assistance Teams in North Carolina

North Carolina's accountability system identifies poorly performing schools and provides them with technical assistance. State Assistance Teams are primarily composed of practicing teachers and school administrators, retired educators, and college professors on loan to the North Carolina Department of Public Instruction. Teams of five are usually assigned to one school as a full-time, year-long job, and team members receive extensive special training prior to their assignments.

Together, school personnel and State Assistance Team members discuss discrepancies between their observations and the state's Effective Schools Correlates and draw up an action plan for the team to implement. The action plans can help schools:

- develop and monitor individualized teacher improvement plans using North Carolina's Teacher Performance Appraisal instrument:
- align their curriculum with the North Carolina Standard Course of Study;
- revise master schedules to allow more instructional time;
- provide guidance on lesson plan development, behavior management, and classroom organization; and
- establish frequent student assessments and coach teachers on how to adjust instruction and plans to devote more instructional time to children who need it.

From *Curriculum Reform: What State Officials Say Works*, Mid-Continent Research for Education and Learning (McREL), 1998.

Kentucky's Extended School Services Program

To receive a variety of state, federal, and local funds, all Kentucky school districts submit a two-year Consolidated Plan for school improvement that includes a list of prioritized needs, activities to achieve goals, and a continuous review plan. Each year the state allocates funds to every school district to operate programs for students at risk of not meeting the academic goals for their grade levels. In turn, districts allocate funds to each school to operate Extended School Services (ESS) before-school, after-school, evening, Saturday, inter-session, or summer school programs.

The ESS program is primarily intended to be an intervention model rather than a remedial program, and is designed to help students as soon as problems surface instead of when they fall behind. The program is viewed as an extension of the regular classroom program and thus an integral part of the schools' total instructional program, not as a separate, categorical, stand-alone program. Instruction is expected to be closely aligned with the schools' curricula and the state's program of studies. Although ESS programs are allowed to provide supportive, non-instructional services, the major emphasis of all local projects must be mastery of academic goals.

The majority of local projects funded by ESS are located in public school buildings. However, ESS programs are sometimes based in community locations (i.e., libraries) and may be combined with other programs during the summer (i.e., YMCA, community recreation). Over 90 percent of students served by the ESS program participate in after-school programming.

From *Extended Learning Initiatives: Opportunities and Implementation Challenges; Profiles of Six Selected State-Sponsored Initiatives*, Council of Chief State School Officers, 2000.

capacity to pursue education reform. In recent years several states have initiated programs that target resources and technical assistance to build capacity in persistently low-performing or declining schools. In Kentucky, "distinguished educators," who are highly regarded principals and teachers selected and trained by the state, are assigned for a year or longer to provide intensive, focused assistance to schools that continue to decline in performance. In addition, the Kentucky Leadership Academy provides voluntary regional cadre training for teams from any district for a period of 18 months. Maryland and North Carolina also support school-based improvement teams (see box on opposite page).

As documented by Mid-continent Research for Education and Learning, a growing number of states directly tie the accreditation of schools or districts to assessments that align with standards.[117] Experience demonstrates that linking accreditation to assessment promotes school reform when the accreditation system includes technical assistance for districts that perform poorly. In Michigan, for example, after 93 non-accredited schools were identified and provided with technical assistance through the collaborative efforts of the four largest intermediate school districts, 71 of those schools qualified as accredited on subsequent assessments.

Illinois has established a comprehensive accountability system that emphasizes building school capacity for continuous improvement and focuses resources on the lowest performing schools. Each school district is required to annually conduct an Internal Quality Assurance Review and submit a data-driven, research-based school improvement plan to the state board of education. Depending on how well the school is performing, the state periodically conducts an External Quality Assurance Review by a team charged with assessing the school's instructional strategies and learning processes. These teams work collaboratively with the entire school community and offer positive observations and suggestions to promote improved student learning. The state may grant funds for use in implementing the specific school improvement initiatives discussed in the report. Schools on the state's Academic Early Warning List receive special attention and several levels of interventions and sanctions might be applied, including closing down a school.

Summary of Suggested State Policies and Actions

1. **Ensure that local schools and districts have flexibility in helping all students meet learning standards.**

2. **Provide additional resources to schools with high proportions of disadvantaged students, targeted for specific purposes such as class-size reduction and extended learning initiatives.**

3. **Provide an array of technical assistance and professional development supports to districts, schools, and teachers. In particular, low performing schools may need help in revising curricula to meet standards, adopting more effective instructional strategies, using tests as diagnostic tools, and reallocating budgets to provide more learning opportunities.**

4. **Establish intervention services to assist schools that demonstrate poor student performance. Such assistance can include academic audits, assignment of master teachers or a school team to the school, and extra resources.**

5. **Promote coordinated efforts across state departments to provide poor performing students needed health and social service support.**

Chapter 5
Teachers Skilled in Supporting Achievement

Recommendation:
Ensure that all teachers are well prepared and supported.

One of the keys to student success is the quality of teaching. Research over the past decade has shown that teacher effectiveness influences students' achievement gains.[118] Studies suggest the more effective the teacher, the greater the increase in student achievement gains regardless of student background and environmental influences. In particular, teachers' verbal ability, pedagogical knowledge, subject matter knowledge, and ability to adjust teaching strategies to student needs influence their effectiveness. Therefore, teachers qualified in their subject-matter and teaching are more likely to promote student academic success than teachers lacking training and knowledge.

For the Study Group, the research reinforces the need for states and districts to adopt teacher policies that promote student achievement. This includes a gamut of issues ranging from the qualification, assignment, and professional development of the current teaching force to adequate recruiting, preparation, and induction of future teachers.

Teacher Assignment

Given the strong influence that teachers exert on achievement, the Study Group affirms the goal that schools serving the most at-risk population must have highly effective teachers. Currently, this is not the case. Students in high-poverty schools are more likely to be taught by teachers not fully credentialed or with only bachelors' degrees than students in low-poverty schools. There are also significant differences in the proportion of students being taught by teachers out of field. Recent data show that in 1993-94, one-quarter of the high school teachers in high-poverty schools neither majored nor minored in their respective fields. The proportion decreases to 14 percent in low-poverty schools. A similar pattern emerges when high-minority and low-minority schools are compared.[119]

The Study Group views the employment of underqualified teachers as one of the major impediments to student success. The challenge of assuring that poor and minority children have highly qualified teachers involves state and local policies, contracts, and practices. State and local policymakers have to review how they recruit and assign teachers, the kind of incentives and disincentives exist for teaching in particular schools, and the consequences of senior teacher transfers between and within schools.

Teacher Professional Development

Teacher effectiveness can be improved through professional development. States, districts, and schools need to change from one-time workshops of the past to sustained approaches that focus on what goes on in the classroom and how that affects student learning. A survey of successful high-poverty schools revealed that these schools tended to allocate a larger proportion of funds for professional development.[120] Moreover, these successful schools focused their professional development on helping students reach the standards. These schools did not necessarily use the more traditional formats of staff development. They used professional development to change the quality of the instruction by hiring in-house facilitators for areas of weakness, such as math; creating time for teachers to meet on a regular basis; or funding adoption of a proven program to address an area of weakness in the school.

Teachers benefit from on-site and timely assistance. To a great extent teachers need to see other teachers model lessons and teaching strategies. They need coaching and mentoring. The El Paso, Texas, school district, for example, substantially improved student achievement and began closing the achievement gap between ethnic groups after hiring 50 teacher-coaches to provide assistance to teachers in the school. Staffs that function as professional communities also tend to be more successful schools, as teachers develop more professional conversations, share experiences, and develop collaborative responses.

The Study Group encourages states, districts, and schools to fund and facilitate meaningful professional development tied to proven effective strategies and student achievement. Funding and access should be targeted toward the lowest achieving schools. States and districts should also investigate what technical assistance or networking services they can provide to help build school capacity.

Teachers as Members of a Support Team

Teachers are more effective addressing the needs of students at risk when they function as part of a team. Teams set learning goals and use performance data to analyze progress over time. Teaming provides the opportunity for teachers to devise a coherent response to academic or behavior problems and puts teachers on firmer ground when enlisting parental intervention or seeking additional support services. It has even been suggested that teams identifying students at risk can pass on their knowledge of the student to next year's teachers through the development of an individual plan that identifies where the student is weak or needs catching up and what strategies have been most effectively employed in the past.[121]

While teaming has traditionally referred to teacher teams, the concept of teams in support of student achievement has been widening to include more varied membership and purposes. The successful mainstreaming of students with disabilities is often dependent on fielding a support team for the student. In addition to the classroom teacher, teams can include special education teachers, aides, school counselors/psychologists, and health or other specialists, such as speech pathologists. Together the team enables learning by identifying what supports are needed and how to provide them.

Many of the comprehensive school reform models developed during the last decade incorporate teams to address non-academic problems that hinder student learning. Approaches as varied as James Comer's School Development Program and Robert Slavin's Success for All require a school-based team to address individual students' problems and link the student to needed outside services. The

purpose of the team is to provide timely interventions and address outside factors influencing a student's performance. A teacher might refer a child to a team that includes the school counselor, psychologist, and social worker as well as the parent, and then participate in developing and monitoring the plan developed to address the student's problem.

Implementing effective teaming places challenges at all levels of the education system. Schools must find the time and resources for the team as well as restructure the organization of the staff. Districts and states must find ways to provide the supporting infrastructure, such as the linkages to social and health services. All may have to re-examine the staffing of schools and how teachers define their jobs.

Teacher Recruitment, Preparation and Retention

Finally, the Study Group recognizes that recruiting, training, and retaining quality teachers are key responses to preventing student failure. Too often schools of education have operated in a separate universe from the world of public schools. States and the federal government have begun implementing accountability measures to encourage colleges of education to offer programs of training in skills and content that aligns with the standards set for students. Increasingly, states are holding schools of education accountable for the quality of their output through the performance of their graduates.

With outside encouragement, schools of education are beginning to make needed changes. David Imig of the American Association of Colleges for Teacher Education identifies actions being taken by colleges.[122] For example, recruiting policies are changing in an effort to attract students more reflective of the diversity of the country and the very at-risk populations schools have often failed to serve adequately. Many schools of education have created programs tailored to preparing teachers to meet the needs of urban schools and students. In addition schools of education and the universities that house them have become more active in their outreach to the real world of schools, providing professional development, or developing programs and assistance addressing specific needs. Finally, schools of education are fostering wider use of mentoring for both students and beginning teachers.

The Study Group acknowledges that the recruitment, training, and retention of high-quality teachers is a huge challenge that involves all aspects of the education system. This is illustrated by the policies of one state, Connecticut, described in the adjacent box. The Study Group stresses that if schools of education are going to produce teachers skilled in helping students make it through school, schools of education are going to have to explicitly link that training to its state's K-12 standards of learning. Attaining success will challenge not only the schools of education but state and local districts through their own policies of recruitment, induction, and professional development. Addressing these goals has been the topic of three recent NASBE Study Group reports:

- *The Full Circle: Building a Coherent Teacher Preparation System*, the report of the NASBE Study Group on Coordination and Accountability in Teacher Education (2000).
- *The Numbers Game: Ensuring Quantity and Quality in the Teaching Work Force*, the report of the NASBE Study Group on Teacher Development, Supply, and Demand (1998); and
- *Learning for a Lifetime*, the report of the NASBE Study Group on State Board Linkages with Higher Education (1994).

Reexamining Teacher Recruitment, Education, and Induction

Linda Darling-Hammond argues that putting qualified teachers in every classroom begins with a systemwide strategy at the state and district levels to attract, train, keep, and develop skilled teachers.[123] Among a number of states and urban districts instituting more comprehensive reforms, Connecticut stands out as one of the most successful, as reflected in the state's top rankings on a number of achievement tests and by the narrowing gap between scores of white and minority students. Moreover, over the last decade, the state has moved from teacher shortages and emergency credentialing to a teacher surplus.

Darling-Hammond identifies the following policies and activities that have supported Connecticut's progress:

- significantly increasing and equalizing teacher salaries;
- raising licensing standards and eliminating emergency licensing;
- adding to requirements for teacher education in the areas of reading, working with special needs students and employing research-based practices;
- creation of scholarships to attract top candidates in fields experiencing shortages and for schools serving at-risk populations;
- provision of mentoring and an assessment program for all beginning teachers;
- significant investment in professional development for proven, effective programs and strategies;
- alignment of both student and teaching standards;
- encouraging the linkage of teacher evaluation to teacher standards; and
- creation of a low-stakes tests that districts and schools can use diagnostically.

Summary of Suggested State Policies and Actions

1. **Assure coherence between the K-12 and teacher education systems. This includes developing policies and incentives to recruit teacher candidates that meet the needs of the K-12 workforce; aligning teacher and student standards; and providing candidates continuing professional support through pre-service and beginning teaching.**

2. **Provide opportunities and incentives for continued teacher development targeted to fostering student achievement. States should review teacher recertification policies and state programs for professional development to ensure that the focus is tied to the specific needs of the students and schools. States can also foster teacher networks for learning, providing venues for professional conversations centered around what goes on in the classroom.**

3. **Work with districts to develop a range of complementary policies and incentives—including scholarships, bonuses, and improved working conditions—to attract the most qualified teachers to work in schools serving students less likely to succeed.**

Chapter 6
Never Give Up

Recommendation:
Never give up on students, no matter where they are in their education.

Dropping out increases when students reach high school, especially if they have been retained in the past Even when students are behind, high schools can ease the transition, create courses that help students catch up, and make earning a diploma a realizable goal.

Retention and social promotion policies have more permanent consequences as students approach the age at which they can drop out of school. Although a number of factors can contribute to a student's decision to leave school, the likelihood of becoming a drop-out increases with retention. Students who fall farther and farther behind their age cohort begin to see less and less possibility that they ever will earn a diploma. Yet students who stay with their cohort due to social promotion may perceive it increasingly difficult to earn a diploma as performance replaces seat time as the criteria for graduation. Both sets of circumstances can contribute to students giving up and dropping out.

While the Study Group believes that enacting the recommendations in this report ultimately will prevent most students from lagging too far behind, the Group also recognizes that reforming public schools takes time. In the meantime, significant numbers of students already in the public education pipeline will face these choices as they reach high school age. They cannot be ignored. Playing catch-up is more difficult, but necessary, if school systems are going to keep their covenant of supporting success for all children. We can never give up no matter where our youth are in their school careers.

There are many examples of how schools, districts, and states are trying to help older students at risk of not attaining a diploma. Three general approaches that emerge include restructuring high schools, supporting students' transition to high school, and developing programs for targeted populations.

Restructuring High Schools

As the Study Group explored how to help all students make it through school, they found that sometimes the schools themselves make it more difficult for certain students to succeed. Because one size does not fit all, there has been great interest in developing a number of different models tailored to different populations. The examples that follow seem particularly suited to helping students who have fallen behind and are at risk of not earning a diploma.

Comprehensive high school reform models. Too many inner-city high schools are in trouble. In such schools a majority of students

enter 9th grade with low basic skills and low motivation. This trend continues during high school as evidenced by high absentee, failure, and drop-out rates. In these high schools, a class might graduate at one-third to one-half the number of students at entry. In such environments the problems are so systemic that only comprehensive restructuring will begin to address the needs of so many students. Proponents of whole school reform argue that the solution cannot be found simply by adopting a curriculum change or instituting a support program. Rather, such models offer a coherent combination of organization, instructional, and professional support changes that together can influence student motivation and success. For example, the Talent Development High School, a model specifically aimed at changing troubled schools serving inner-city students, has demonstrated some success (see box on page 49).

Career academies. This school-within-schools approach combines several characteristics that provide extra support to students. Career academies are small (about 30-60 students per grade), and students take classes together with the same team of teachers. Built around a specific career theme, students combine classroom and work-based learning, often including opportunities for workplace internships and mentoring. The approach helps students link the importance of academic achievement to succeeding in the "real world," and the smaller size and teacher teaming approach make it less likely that students will fall behind unnoticed. For at-risk students, research indicates that this approach not only results in much lower drop-out rates, but increases attendance, course completions, and subsequent enrollment in college.

Alternative schools. While generally thought of as primarily serving students who do not do well in traditional school environments, alternative schools actually serve a number of populations and missions. They generally fall into three categories: as schools of choice (often as a magnet program), as a last-chance school for disruptive students, and as a remedial school for students needing academic help or social rehabilitation.[124] For at-risk students the advantage is that these schools tend to be smaller, with lower class sizes, more individualized instruction, and flexible scheduling. By adding to this a clear focus on academic learning that includes the same high expectations, standards, and outcomes valued in traditional schools, alternative schools may provide other pathways to student success. Florida, for example, has developed a self-assessment tool for alternative schools and drop-out prevention programs that helps schools evaluate program elements like the curriculum and instruction against standards of essential practices.[125]

Transitional Support

Transitions between school levels challenge students to adjust to significant changes in their learning environment. Moves from elementary to middle school, or middle to high school, signal a change in buildings, teachers, and social order. At the high school level, the move often means attending a larger, more impersonal institution. These "gateways" also signal more difficult coursework. Preoccupied with the changes, many students, especially those with low-level basic skills, lose even more ground academically. Retention rates tend to spike at these transition grades. Increases in retention are particularly significant at the 9th grade level when the schoolwork gets more difficult, state policies are more likely to link course and test passage to promotion, and students often do not understand the consequences that their high school performance has on their future.

While transition programs vary, the most common elements include creating a more personal environment for learning, stressing core academic and study skills, and aiding student maturation through the development of social skills and relating the consequences of schooling to adult life. Restructuring schools to a K-8 configuration is one approach used to ease transition to the middle grades because students are not moving to a totally new environment, the grade size remains much smaller and personal, and the schedule is more flexible.

In an example of another approach, after retaining half of its freshmen, a Cleveland high school created the Ninth Grade Success Academy. The program used block periods to double the time students spent in math and English classes, and also required all 9th grade students to take a course on study, research, and social skills. At the end of the first year, the 9th grade retention rate decreased to 13 percent.[126]

Targeted Programs

Targeted approaches separate students who have fallen behind, at least temporarily. They provide an opportunity for students to catch up without actually repeating the same grade with the same material and teaching strategies. Targeted programs often motivate students by providing them ways to make up academic deficits and re-join their own class, or least be reintegrated into the general school population. It is possible to condense learning because students are often revisiting concepts and skills already covered. As with the other approaches to helping retained students, these programs often feature more individualized learning plans, smaller classes, and additional support programs.

One such approach is to assign retained students to a "half grade" or what is sometimes referred to as a transitional grade. For example, in Milwaukee, students who do not meet promotion requirements to 9th grade can be given an "8-T" status and moved on to the high school, but they follow individual plans to address specific areas of need. Students who progress and fill the academic gaps can then be reclassified to 9th grade status.

Sometimes creating a program for a target group reflects safety concerns and the need to move students who have become too old out of an inappropriate learning environment. Even then, the program can have an academic focus that goes beyond just separating out specific students. For example, in the fall of 2000, Cleveland opened two schools for 500 6th graders who were 15 years old. The schools provide students with more attention, support, and flexibility both inside and outside the classroom. Although it is unrealistic to expect there is enough time for these students to complete their secondary education, the intent is to make up enough years so that students will be encouraged to pursue an equivalency diploma through adult education and GED programs.[127]

The Study Group believes that students should never lose the opportunity to learn and that states, districts, and schools should continue to explore and develop approaches that provide even those farthest behind with ways to achieve challenging academic standards.

Summary of Suggested State Policies and Actions

1. **Provide resources and assistance to districts and schools to promote new approaches to ensuring the success of all students. These strategies can include restructuring high schools, establishing career academies and alternative schools, and providing transitional support services designed to assist and engage students at risk of dropping out.**

2. **Review how approaches such as alternative schools or transition and re-entry programs fit into existing policies and guidelines. The need for such approaches to have smaller classes, more individualized approaches, and extra support services can have implications for a range of issues, from how the program is keyed to the standards and graduation requirements to the appropriateness of existing funding formulas.**

A Comprehensive High School Model

Through its work with inner-city high schools, Johns Hopkins University's Center for Research on the Education of Students Placed At Risk (CRESPAR) began designing the Talent Development High School model with career academies in 1994.[128] This comprehensive school reform model incorporates changes in school organization, curriculum, and instruction, plus staff professional development, to address the challenges posed by troubled high schools generally characterized by low achievement scores and poor graduation rates.

The model includes a number of elements designed to help students "break the cycle of failure," a process supported by restructuring and building the capacity of the school itself. Major components of the model follow.

Ninth Grade Success Academy. To support the transition from middle school, all entering freshmen are assigned to an interdisciplinary team of teachers in a school-within-a-school approach. Students take four complete courses a semester through the use of a flexible block schedule with extended periods of 90 minutes. This allows students promoted to high school with poor basic skills to take a "double-dose" curriculum in English and math. Courses have been designed specifically to catch up students who are two or more grade levels behind in reading or who lack the basic skills required to succeed in algebra and geometry. Students also take Freshman Seminar, a course designed to give students needed social and study skills as well as enhance their understanding of how success in school is relevant to success in adult life.

Career academies. Students spend the rest of high school in self-contained career academies of 250-350 students. There is no tracking, as the academies provide all students with a core college preparatory curriculum and work-based learning experiences designed in accordance with local employers' needs.

Make-up courses on students' own time. Students get only one chance to pass a course during school. Students can retake courses or earn needed credits by attending Summer school, Saturday school, or after-hours "credit school."

Teacher support. The model builds in several layers of professional support. Beyond the traditional kind of workshop training that introduces the design and curriculum, the model incorporates a lot of classroom-level assistance on model lessons and effective instructional strategies. These include peer teachers providing weekly in-classroom assistance, lead teachers who have received more intensive training, and instructional facilitators provided by Johns Hopkins.

Twilight School. This alternative education program nested in the school is designed to help both students demonstrating behavior problems or having trouble adjusting to school and students re-entering school after expulsion or time spent in the juvenile justice system. The twilight school meets after school for three hours daily and students take two or three classes for credit. In addition to featuring small classes with an academic emphasis, the Twilight School provides counseling and other support as needed.

Appendix: State Successes in Standards-Based Reform

RAND's recently published study, *Improving Student Achievement: What NAEP State Test Scores Tell Us*, contains encouraging findings that certain standards-driven reforms can effectively raise student achievement and narrow the achievement gaps between different racial and ethnic groups.[129] **North Carolina** and **Texas**—two of the states showing the highest rate of improvement from 1990 to 1996—were the subject of a case study to try to identify plausible reasons for their large gains. The case study concluded that changes in key resource variables and teacher characteristics could not explain any significant part of the gains. Instead, the researchers identified a set of similar systemic reform policies implemented in both states in the late 1980s and early 1990s as being the most plausible reason for the gains. These policies included:

- developing state standards by grade;
- assessment tests linked to these standards;
- deregulation of the teaching environment;
- good systems for providing feedback to teachers and principals; and
- effective accountability measures.

The researchers gave high marks to accountability systems in both states, which assign ratings to schools and identify low-performing schools, reward successful schools, provide assistance to low-performing schools, and sanction persistently failing schools.

Texas has gained particular attention and praise for narrowing achievement gaps between different racial/ethnic groups. For example, the passing rate for Hispanic 10th graders on the Texas state tests rose from 34 percent in 1994 to 70 percent in 2000. Although critics quibble about the true value of the apparent progress, key to this improvement has been the practice of disaggregating test scores and rating schools on how well each of several targeting groups are doing instead of just looking at school-wide averages.

Connecticut is another state that has seen rapid gains in student performance among all socioeconomic groups and major racial/ethnic groups. Connecticut's reading achievement was the highest in the nation on the 1998 NAEP, and, since 1992, the most improved in the country. White, Black and Hispanic students in Connecticut each performed better than their counterparts in other states. The National Education Goals Panel commissioned a major case study to investigate to what extent were Connecticut's high and improved reading scores explained by its educational policies rather than its wealth, race/ethnicity, and parental education; and to identify the state-level and district-level policies and practices that might have contributed to the improved reading scores.[130] The findings are instructive and worth examining in detail.

The study concluded that whereas Connecticut's wealth and other advantages could be used to explain the state's high achievement in reading, they could not explain the state's strong *improvement* in reading between 1992-1998. Rather, the researchers concluded that, "It is clear that many state-level policies and practices have contributed to Connecticut's high and improved reading scores." Interviews with state-level policymakers and local school personnel in the most improved school districts were conducted to identify the most valuable policies and practices.

First, most of the districts which had made the greatest improvement in reading reported that the wide dissemination of the Connecticut Mastery Test (CMT) objectives and the increasingly user-friendly reporting mechanisms enabled them to clarify their teaching priorities.

Test results are reported to school districts by district, school, classroom, and individual students. Parent reports are generated for each student. Scores are also distributed directly to the state's newspapers who typically report them as front page stories. Several of the districts interviewed expressed appreciation for the ways in which scores were reported to them, which permitted their own further analyses of their test data. Local staff members stated to the researchers that the skills assessed on the state's reading tests were important ones and, for the most part, their efforts to realign their district's curriculum and instructional practices based on the tests resulted in sound changes.

Second, the visibility of school-level results through the state's publication of comprehensive school report cards have also motivated several districts to make changes in their reading instruction. Each local superintendent of schools must annually prepare a strategic school profile report for each school under its jurisdiction and for the school district as a whole, and report the information to the state Commissioner of Education and the local board of education. As a result, since 1993 the state has produced a report entitled, *Profiles of Our Schools: Condition of Education in Connecticut*, which provides data on each of the 1068 public schools in the state's 166 school districts. Test scores are provided for a period of several years for each school so that school personnel and the public can monitor improvement over time.

Third, the provision of resources to the state's neediest school districts through categorical grants have enabled these districts to enhance their reading initiatives and to begin to close the gap between their scores and those statewide. One result of a lawsuit over disparities between high and low achieving districts was the development of a procedure in 1984 for identifying the state's fourteen most needy school districts. Their designation as Priority School Districts (PSD) is accompanied by the provision of additional resources through a series of categorical grants. Research has found the steady improvement of students in these school districts can, in part, be attributed to the infusion of financial and human resources. Test score gaps between the poorest districts and the rest of the state on is also beginning to close. Educators in these districts emphasized the important contribution of the PSD funds to their improved performance.

Fourth, the researchers reported that many district officials spontaneously mentioned during interviews the high quality of their teachers and administrators as reasons for their growth. Some administrators have noted that the quality of preparation of teacher candidates is continuing to improve, especially with respect to their level of familiarity with new forms of technology. The 1986 Educational Enhancement Act raised the standards for incoming teachers, required continual professional development for experienced teachers, and established the Beginning Educator Support and Training (BEST) Program to provide a comprehensive induction program of support and assessment for beginning teachers. The act also committed more than $300 million to "attract and retain high-quality teachers by making teachers' starting and mid-career salaries competitive with other occupations requiring similar training, to reduce disparities in teacher salaries among the State's school districts, and enable local communities in Connecticut to command competitive positions with districts in other states in attracting and retaining high-quality teachers." One result is that when there is a teaching opening in a Connecticut elementary school, there are often several hundred applicants.

In addition, the researchers concluded that the percentages of Connecticut students attending preschool was likely to be a contributing factor to Connecticut's high and improved reading achievement. Not only did Connecticut have the largest percentage of students in the U.S. attending preschool in 1991-1992, but between then and 1997-1998 participation increased from 64 percent to 70 percent.

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